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BBC TG
Issue 393

When the idea of a hot hatch supertest was first floated, hooked around the arrival of the shiny new Alpine A290 on UK soil, we weren't optimistic about attendees. After all, this is a genre dying out faster than Prince Harry's inheritance, and yet a quick brainstorm scraped together 10 new or recently refreshed contenders, with a couple of recognised favourites thrown in. More than enough for re-establishing the hot hatch order.

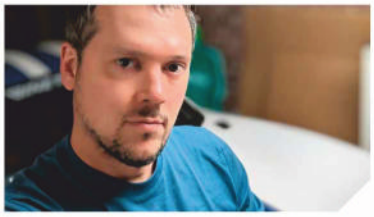
What struck me though, on arriving at a bitterly cold Anglesey circuit to see our hot hatch buffet laid out in the pitlane, was the menagerie of metal, a mix of household names and total newbies, traditional powertrains and ballistic grade electronics. GTI, ST, Type R, these are the staples in a hot hatch diet that's kept us fed for decades, but now we find VZ, Alpine, Ioniq 5 N. Much debate raged around that last one, whether it even deserved to be here, given its £65k price, SUV size and supercar power output, but hey, we're an equal opportunities place.

What it meant was the evaluation process was fascinating. Here were cars that shared a vague silhouette, a penchant for practicality, and (Hyundai aside) at least half an eye on affordability, but the driving experiences were wildly different. From silent detachment in the modestly powered Alpine, to proper unruly, old school driver engagement in the Focus ST. Without totally spoiling the ending, the conclusion was predictable – that a feisty engine up front driving the front wheels, a manual gearbox, and a chassis that doesn't mind moving about a bit is the formula that forged hot hatch legends of the past, and it still rings true today.

But here on a chilly racetrack in the shadow of Snowdonia was a microcosm of the car industry as a whole. Yes, there's lots to get angry and opinionated about, texture to the driving experience that's being lost in an onslaught of copy/paste EVs... but we're certainly not short on choice and diversity. Cars, especially performance cars, are splintering off in all sorts of directions, but for enthusiasts like us who care deeply about where we're heading and what's being left behind, it means a bounty of interesting metal, not merely variations on an identical theme. In years to come we'll look back on this as a time of plenty.

Enjoy the issue,

CONTRIBUTORS



WHO: *MIKE CHANNELL*

TopGear's resident gaming genius is wondering if sim racing can help you become a proper racer. Discuss

WHO: *JASON BARLOW*

When we needed someone to journey to the middle of nowhere to test the new LR Octa, there was one choice – Jason 'Biltong' Barlow

WHO: *PETER GREENWOOD*

UK based Peter is a vector illustrator of the highest calibre... for evidence see his latest work for us on p64

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Jethro Bovingdon, Mike Channell, Richard Holt, Sam Philip

CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHERS
Lee Brimble, Mark Fagelson, Jonny Fleetwood, Wilson Hennessy, Rowan Horncastle, Olgun Kordal, Jamie Lipman, Dennis Noten, Richard Pardon, Mark Riccioni, Philipp Rupprecht, John Wycherley

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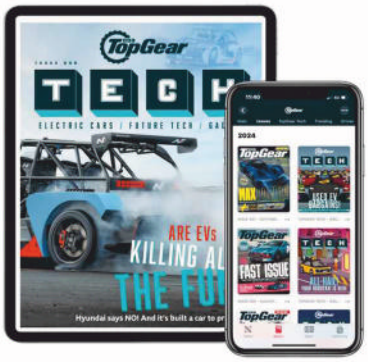

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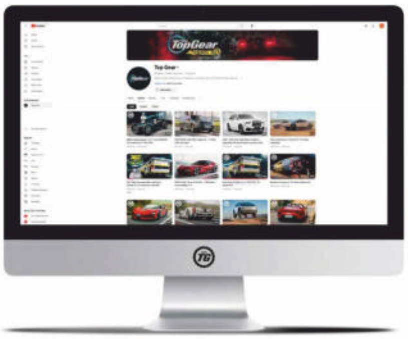

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069 **HOTA TO HATCHO**
Ollie Kew takes one of *TG*'s most favourite hot hatches to the cities that inspired a genre. NB: not actually factually correct

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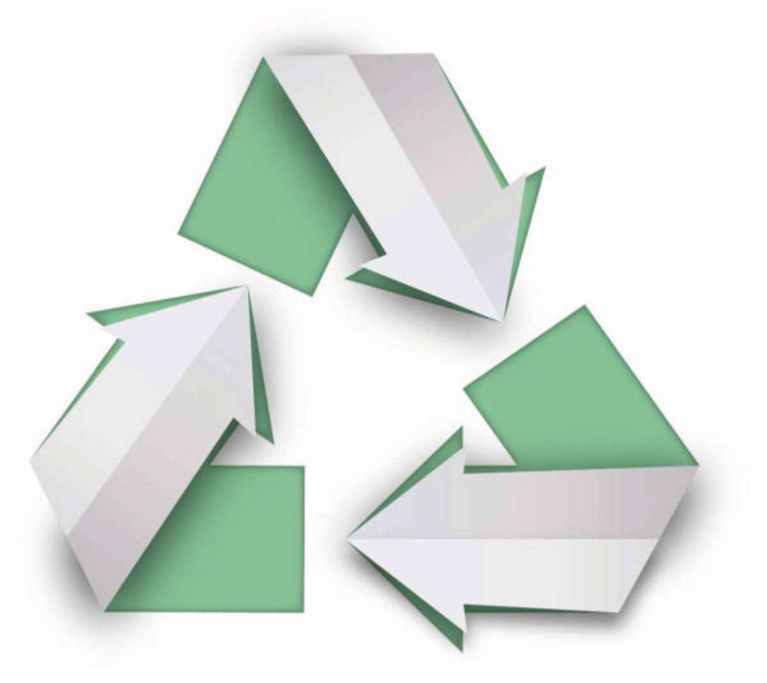

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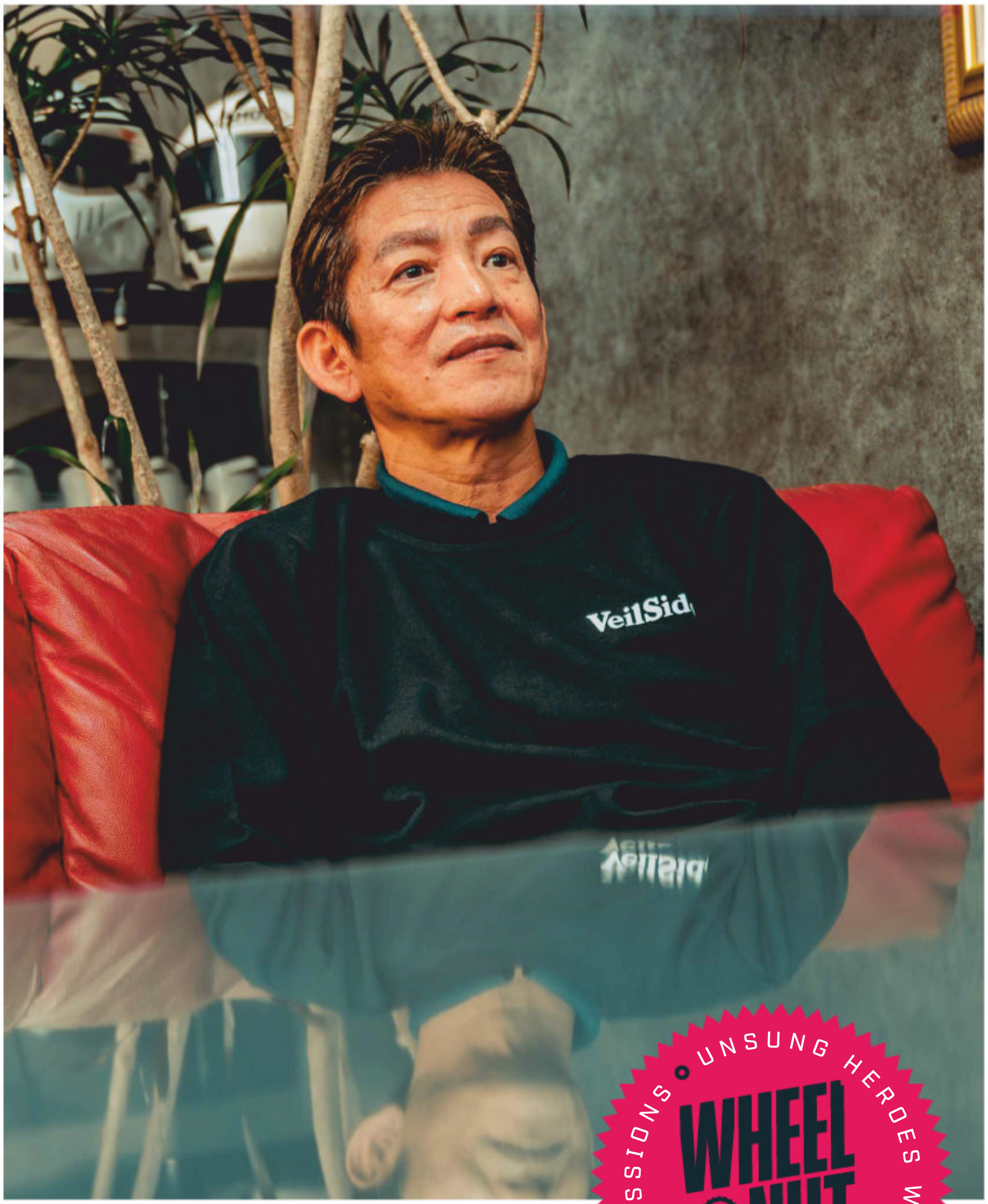


UNSUNG HEROES WITH UNHEALTHY OBSESSIONS

WHEEL NUT

The OG Japanese tuner

From kitchen hand to one of the founding fathers of the Japanese tuning industry. Meet VeilSide founder Hironao Yokomaku

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY MARK RICCIONI

When Hironao Yokomaku joined a French restaurant aged 16, little did he know how much he'd influence Japan's car culture in the following decades.

Now aged 63, the Tsukuba based tuner shows no signs of slowing down having just unveiled a new project alongside *Fast and Furious* actor Sung Kang. Because for nearly four decades Yokomaku-san has led the iconic Japanese tuning brand VeilSide.

Many of us will be familiar with VeilSide's work from the *Tokyo Drift* edition of *Fast and Furious* – especially the 'Fortune' Mazda RX-7 which remains a poster car for the entire franchise. But long before *F&F* became a household name, VeilSide had established itself as one of Japan's most advanced tuners, building the fastest cars in the country with exteriors almost as loud as the exhaust notes.

The company's distinctive look was inspired by the Batmobile of all things, and in the decades that followed it's now synonymous with 1990s and 2000s Japanese car culture – think huge, sculpted rear wings and curved, ankle breaking splitters. During this time, Yokomaku-san wanted to create cars that he felt were 'complete' packages, something missing from other tuners at the time who would only focus on a single element. But a VeilSide car needed blistering performance, sharpened handling and bespoke aero before it could ever wear the hallowed 'Fortune' or 'Combat' name depending on the level of work involved.

The look didn't just inspire other Japanese tuners; it even crossed continents with VeilSide-style bodykits being adapted on European cars during the *Max Power* era. Everyone wanted a piece of the pie. And while the good times felt like a perpetual party, those bad times that followed would put Yokomaku-san on the brink of shutting it down altogether. Now, with the company enjoying a resurgence in 2025, the 63-year-old tuning legend is keen to remind the world of VeilSide's 35 year history.

"At first I started riding around on customised motorbikes, and of course I thought mine was the fastest!" explains Yokomaku-san. "That was until one day I raced a Nissan Bluebird with a tuned engine. I lost… easily. And that's when I knew my tuning life had started. When I began driving at 18, I immediately got a job at a car shop to feed my obsession with speed…"

Car tuning in the 1980s wasn't exactly the behemoth it is today. As the owner of an S30 Nissan Fairlady, Yokomaku-san tuned its engine by trial and error, leading to many rebuilds while drag racing others. By the age of 22 he'd honed his craft enough to establish his own business – Yokomaku Racing

Service – working tirelessly every day to build the fastest S30 in Japan. His *pièce de résistance* was to turbocharge Nissan's L-series engine which immediately led to more victories while drag racing. Then, a year later, he turned his attention towards the new Nissan Skyline R32 GT-R.

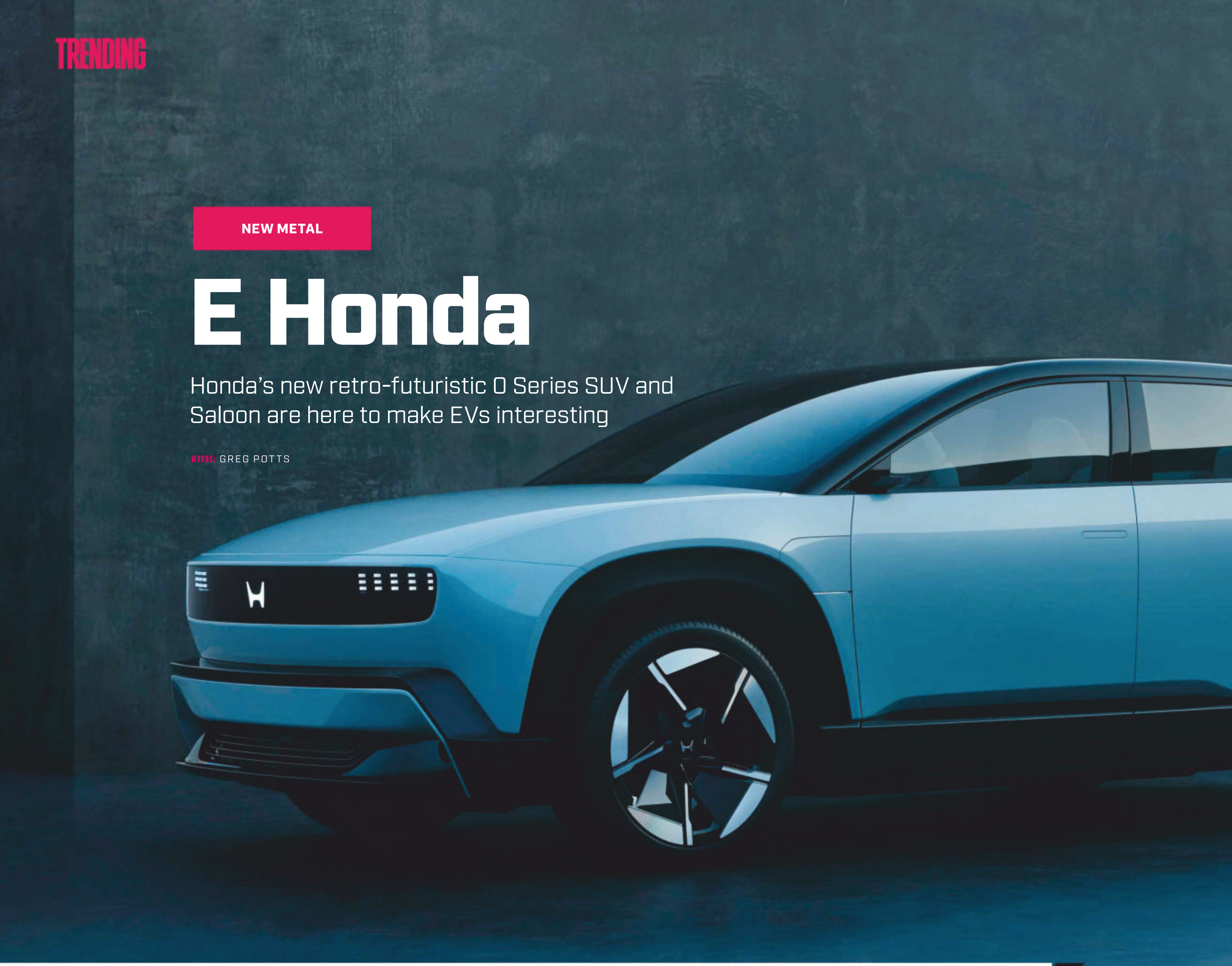
At the age of 28, Yokomaku-san was beating established tuners at just about every discipline. Keen to showcase his skills beyond simply going fast, Yokomaku Racing Service then became VeilSide – Yoko meaning Side and Maku meaning Veil. "Between 1990 and 1999, I set many Japanese records including top speed, drag racing and the fastest 0–300kph time of 13.72 seconds in our R-1 StreetDrag R32 Skyline," Yokomaku-san adds. "Our cars were very distinctive, but also the fastest. So many requests for engine tuning would come from owners across Japan, and before long I was reminded of the dangers of tuning after frequent accidents in tuned cars occurred across Japan. I did not want this to happen, so I decided to create a car that could attract people's attention without running at crazy speeds. After winning awards at Tokyo Auto Salon for many years, our cars and look became very popular."

Tokyo Drift may be VeilSide's most infamous film, but its aero has been present in every *Fast and Furious* since day one. Remember Toretto's red RX-7? That's Veilside. Oh, and Suki's pink S2000 from *2 Fast 2 Furious*? Yup, that one too. Unfortunately for Yokomaku-san, this popularity led to an overwhelming demand which left VeilSide unable to maintain supply. Before long, a rise in cheap replica parts had flooded the market instead, and as the tuning industry slumped in the mid 2000s the company found itself on the brink of bankruptcy.

"During this time, VeilSide moved away from the spotlight with a focus on survival," Yokomaku-san adds. "It wasn't until *Tokyo Drift* made a big impact all over the world, that people began to remember us and expose a new generation to our designs. That was a good feeling. I started the company after many bad experiences with other tuners, so to still be creating exciting cars for enthusiasts all around the world is very moving. I am not getting any younger, but for the future all I hope is VeilSide can continue to inspire the next generation of tuning fans just like myself all those decades ago."

No autographs please. This film star has a photoshoot to star in

When you run out of room in the house you've got to keep your kids' gymnastics trophies somewhere...



NEW METAL

E Honda

Honda's new retro-futuristic 0 Series SUV and Saloon are here to make EVs interesting

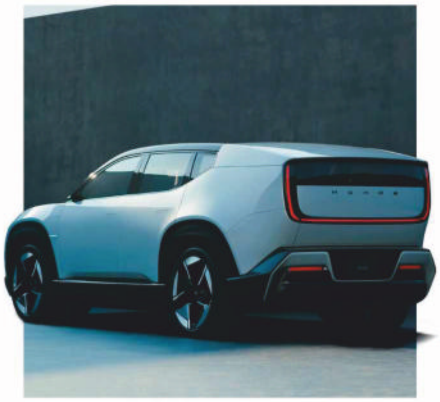
WORDS: GREG POTTS

NO, YOU'RE NOT SUFFERING FROM SOME kind of concept car deja vu – we have actually seen a version of these cars before. First unveiled at CES 2024, they were originally the Honda Saloon and Space-Hub concepts. Newly updated and with the covers whipped off at CES 2025, they're now to be referred to as the 0 Saloon and 0 SUV prototypes.

Honda's 0 Series is supposed to be a complete reset with "thin, light and wise" EVs. These two cars will both be on sale in 2026 and five others will follow by 2030. Unfortunately, four of those will be SUVs.

Still, Honda says the four door (far right) will be the flagship and that its "low height and sporty styling sets it apart from other EVs". Anyone else seeing a four door Lamborghini Gallardo?

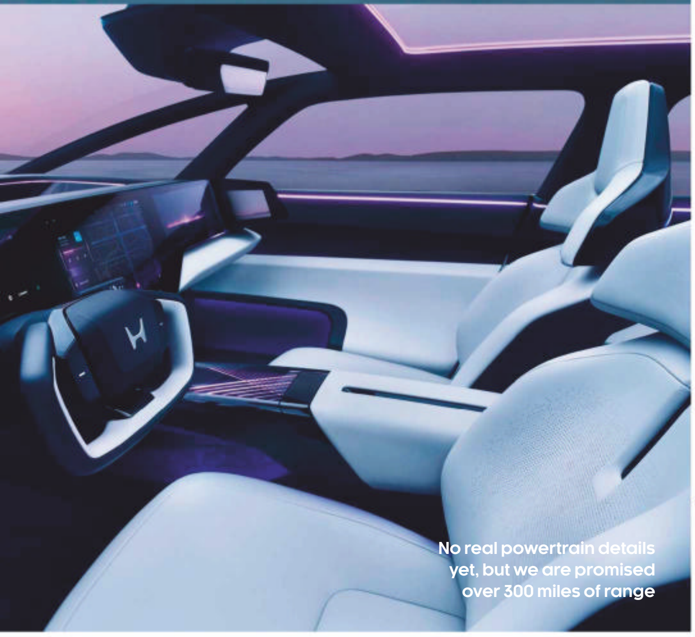
At CES this year Honda focused on the 'wise' with the announcement of Level 3 automated driving for the 0 Saloon, allowing the driver to take their eyes off the road and perform a "second task".



There's also news of its new Asimo OS that'll be deployed in the 0 Series cars. Asimo – Honda's walking, talking humanoid robot – has essentially had his supremely cute little brain filled with AI and moulded into an operating system which will look after the car's ECUs, its active safety systems and its infotainment.

The 0 SUV will be the first of the 0 Series cars to hit the road. Honda is also talking about '3D gyro sensors' that have been developed by its robotics team and should "enable dynamics at the will of the driver on various road surfaces". We're not entirely sure what that means, but perhaps it'll corner so flat they won't be able to resist doing a range of 0 Series Type Rs?

"I cannot say at this point," said Toshihiro Akiwa, boss of Honda's BEV development centre when *TG* asked about the prospect. "However, you have a battery and an electric motor, so we cannot match what we have with an engine. But, as an electric vehicle, the question is how can we provide the joy of driving that Honda is known for? That's what the 0 Saloon is all about. We haven't given up on that."



No real powertrain details yet, but we are promised over 300 miles of range

HIT or MISS

Two titans of the editorial team have it out

GREG POTTS

***TG*'S STAFF WRITER HAS A SOFT SPOT FOR THE FUTURE**

Forget about all the SUVs in their varying shapes and sizes – the 0 Saloon looks like it could be absolutely brilliant. It's a giant Gandini-esque wedge with a modern day take on pop-up headlights. I was at CES and had a sit inside the concept with its dramatic four-seat interior. There's no rear window, but I'd happily take that if those rear lights make production. The huge glass roof means it's light enough inside too. If it can keep off the biscuits and drives as well as Honda is suggesting, it could be the perfect EV for those who can't stand the face of the BMW i4 or the general meltiness of the Mercedes-Benz EQE. Just needs a better name.

"It could be the perfect EV for those who can't stand the i4"

SAM BURNETT

***TG*'S SUB-EDITOR IS ALWAYS FURIOUS ABOUT SOMETHING OR OTHER**

Oh look, the car's fine, it hits all the concept car bingo highlights and shows that Honda's busily beavering away at something or other. I don't even mind that the styling comes courtesy of a 1990s DustBuster vacuum cleaner, my issue is that it's coming along 15 years late. The Urban EV and Sports EV concepts back in 2017 looked nice but were already running late eight years ago. And then Honda bottled the rollout with the lardy e city car. How hard can it be to knock out some forgettably average electric SUVs with a decent slug of range? Honda doesn't have the luxury of an extravagant philosophy, it just needs to make some cars we'll actually buy.

"My issue is that it's coming along 15 years late"

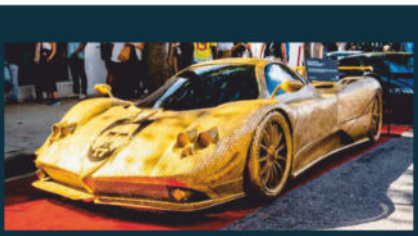
VIRAL

Around the world in seven questionable car stories

1. USA

Self-driving taxi goes rogue, drives in tight circles in a car park

Are we ready to hand over control to driverless cars? LA tech entrepreneur Mike Johns became trapped in a Waymo robotaxi on his way to the airport after it began continuously doing loops in the car park. Good luck trying to get them to believe that one at the check in desk.



2. Uruguay ↖

Artist creates Pagani Zonda out of 100,000 gold coins

A Uruguayan artist by the name of Joaquin Arbiza was commissioned to create a one off, definitely not V12 powered Pagani Zonda art car. The lifesized model car is built from over 100,000 coins and showcases the collector's admiration for mildly famous footballer Lionel Messi. Impressive, huh?

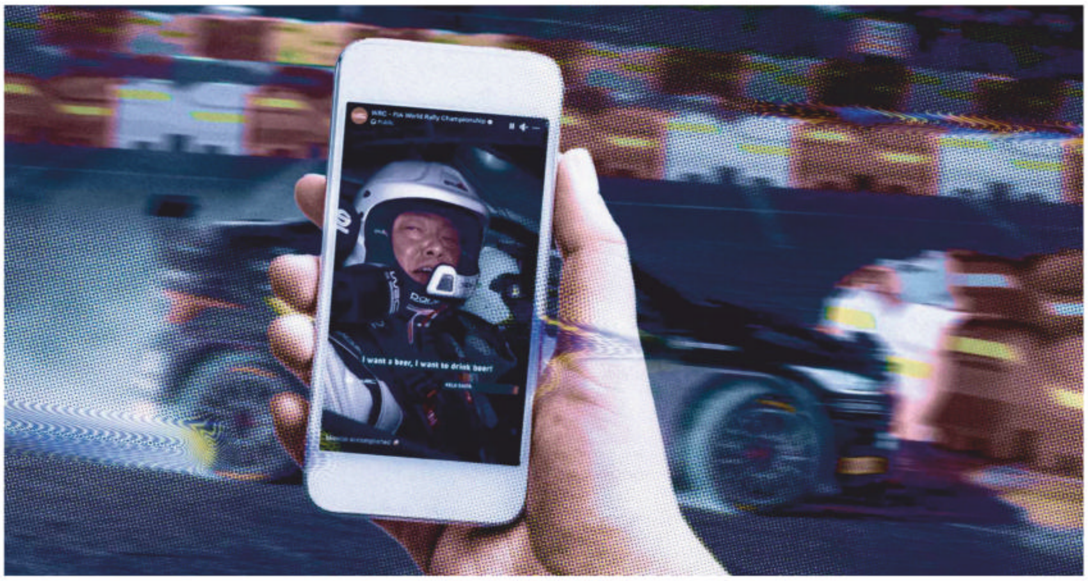
3. USA

Driver returns car by sending it through dealer's front door ↙

A disgruntled Subaru Outback buyer returned it to the dealership he bought it from by smashing it through the front door. The incident caused $10k (£8.3k) of damage and occurred after Tim Dahle Mazda in Utah refused to accept the allegedly mechanically faulty car back.

4. Japan
WRC driver just wants a beer ↘

There were comedic scenes at the conclusion of the 2024 Rally Japan when Japanese driver Keiji Seita was interviewed after completing a stage. "Tell me about the stage in there, everything OK?" the reporter asked him. "Everything OK," he responded, before adding, "But I'm very hungry! I want a beer, I want to drink beer!" The bewildered interviewer eventually gave up asking questions and allowed the driver to head off and get 'hydrated'. Footage later released on the official WRC social channels showed Seita being given his much desired beer. Kimi Räikkönen would be proud.


WRC - FIA World Rally Championship
I want a beer, I want to drink beer!

5. Australia
Long awaited new Mustang stolen just before delivery

Imagine waiting two years for your new car, only for it to be stolen moments before delivery. That's the reality for this 1 of 1,000 Ford Mustang Dark Horse buyer, who instead of the car received the news it had been stolen from the Port of Melbourne just days before it was due to be delivered. Even worse, the remaining 999 are sold too...

6. Vietnam
Snitches get... cash, apparently

Vietnamese authorities have announced that they will pay citizens up to 5m Vietnamese dong (£162) – or 10 per cent of the fine – to report traffic offenders. Cameras at the ready!

7. Monaco
Lando Norris's F40 crashed

Days after a video went viral of a Ferrari F40 ending up on its side in an accident in the UK, footage has emerged of another F40 – owned by, but not being driven at the time by, F1 ace Lando Norris – hitting a barrier in Monaco. Must have been an awkward call.

coffee break

What we're watching/ listening/doing, while we should be working

Groundhog Day, 2 Feb
"Hey! Phil? Phil? Hey! Phil Connors!" We like to celebrate by sitting down in a comfy chair with a brew to watch 1993 Bill Murray at his finest. We're not American

F1 pre-season testing, 26–28 Feb
No need to remind you that there will be a 40 year old man wearing a red suit and yellow helmet, driving a car very fast. Ciaaaooww

***Dog Man*, in cinemas 7 Feb**
Half dog, half man. A beautifully animated doozy of a film about a superhero cop, reanimated from the head of a dog and the body of a policeman. Yes it's American, and yes you'll be going to see it over the...

February half term
ATTENTION. This is your early reminder. They will be not be in school. They will need to be entertained. They will want your money. ALL OF IT. You have been warned

Valentine's Day
That time of year again to remember that you're the best at romantic poetry. Your Land Rover is red, his Volvo is blue. But you've got a friend with a Lambo and they're better than the both of you

PLAYLIST

SCAN HERE TO FIND THEM ALL

Procrastination ahoy! Six videos you need to watch now

STIG vs SUPERVAN

A 2,000bhp, electric Ford Transit with silly downforce, slick tyres and Stig behind the wheel. It couldn't be the fastest thing on four wheels to ever lap the *TopGear* track... could it?

SANTA'S LITTLE HELPER

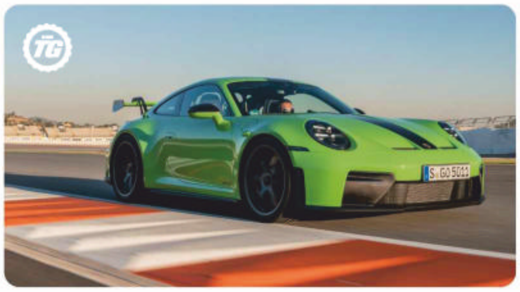
No better place to do a roadtrip than New Zealand, just ask Ollie Marriage. He's been from top to toe of the antipodean islands in a Santa Fe to deliver copies of the magazine to subscribers

OCTA-GONE

The most powerful Defender ever was launched to the world in South Africa. Jack Rix tries his best to break the 626bhp, 553lb ft, rally ready offroader on a variety of harsh and unforgiving terrain

F-ZERO TO HERO

OK readers, time to strap in for some 1,013bhp, 516lb ft single seat V10 madness. Kiwi David Dicker allowed *TG* to take a tour of his latest creation that he reckons will make Newey's RB17 look slow



PORSCHE 911 GT3

The updated Porsche 911 GT3 is here to melt our brains all over again. Jethro stuck his hand up to see if Porsche can improve on near perfection, and whether it's better with or without a wing

MODEL WHY?

The Tesla Model Y is the world's bestselling electric car. Question is, has Elon done more than add Robocop headlights to this updated version? Tom Ford takes a poke around

THE GOOD

The worst aesthetic part of the Y was the ugly front end. With the current changes it looks OK

FastDoc

It's not a bad looking car

Jon Gillespie

Basically they got rid of the ugly bits and kept the rest the same. Pretty logical approach. Works for me

Simon Harrison

Looks great, will probably upgrade from my Model 3

Jon-Lennart Landaas

ABSOLUTELY GORGEOUS

Lee Reid

THE BAD

Now it just looks like any other crossover on the street. Way to not stand out!

Larry Moore

DID THE DESIGNERS JUST USE TRACING PAPER?

Max McKenzie

Looks like the same garbage it was before

Jamie White

Yawnnn… still a Tesla, innit?

Honest

Wow they added a light bar front and back like everyone else did five years ago

Shameke Forsythe

THE UGLY

It looks sooooooooooo old side on. Heck if I wanted to buy a dinosaur I'd go to a museum not Tesla

Johann van Rensburg

Just goes to show that terrible looks are no impediment to sales

Alex King

IT ONCE WAS A FRESH DESIGN ON THE MARKET. NOW I CAN'T HELP ASSOCIATE IT AS A SWOLLEN BREAM DRESSED IN METALLIC MAKE UP

Jan Ideberg

Junk junk junk. Jellybean on a skateboard

Erick Cermelj

Wouldn't buy a bottle of water if I was on fire from Elon

Shane Tomblin

COMMENTS

TESLA MODEL Y

THE WORLD'S MOST POPULAR ELECTRIC CAR HAS BEEN GIVEN a fairly massive makeover. You're looking at the brand new Tesla Model Y. Though for now, this first edition car is only available in China and Australia. Don't fret, UK, we'll get it soon enough.

It gets a more mature look, with a near single strip headlight and single strip taillight. Both the front and rear bumpers have been subtly tweaked too, and Tesla says it's been redesigned "to maximise efficiency". The range has increased from 331 miles in the Long Range AWD, to 341 miles in this AWD first edition, codenamed 'Juniper'. Initial figures suggest tweaks to the powertrain mean it now covers the 0–62mph sprint half a second faster too, down from 4.8 to 4.3 seconds.

Inside, an 8in rear touchscreen for accessing games and other entertainment media joins the 15.4in infotainment system up front. But none of that really matters, for the internet has spoken, and the opinions are… mixed. **CAT DOW**

WATCHES

French fancies

Approximately no one thinks of the French as luxury watchmakers… turns out they are

WORDS: RICHARD HOLT

IN THE LATE 18TH CENTURY, Paris was the Silicon Valley of watchmaking. And the comparison isn't as daft as it sounds. The marine chronometer was the groundbreaking technology of the day, allowing ships to navigate the world without the point and hope approach of earlier centuries.

Sadly for French watchmaking, this was also when the guillotining started. And most of the posh heads that rolled were the ones buying expensive watches. Watchmakers fled over the border, helping Switzerland to become the watchmaking hub of the world.

This wasn't the French Revolution's only effect on the clock industry. It brought in decimal currency, a great idea that Britain failed to adopt for another two centuries. The problem was the French didn't stop at money.

The revolutionaries were so obsessed with washing away the old regime they wanted to decimalise everything, including time – meaning a 10-day week and a 10-hour clock.

The few remaining French clockmakers were forced to make clocks accordingly, with some showing both old and new time, making it even more confusing. Luckily within a few years, the French saw sense and said "*Non*" to the whole decimalised time business.

France's watch industry has never returned to its former glory, but it is fighting back. Here are a few modern brands that may offer you a touch of *joie de vivre*.

PRO TIP

A rejection of accepted wisdom has long been central to the thinking of French philosophers from René Descartes to Eric Cantona. The central tenet being that you shouldn't be bound by what other people want you to think. Therefore, if you want to buy a bright red watch, you should get one. And wear it with pride. Be free to set your own path through life, and let the seagulls follow your trawler.

BLOW THE BUDGET

BRM V6 Cercolor

BRM Chronographes has nothing do with the defunct British F1 team BRM. Well, not directly. It was formed in the early 2000s by French motor racing enthusiast Bernard Richards. He takes a love of motor racing as the inspiration for his watches. The V6 Cercolor Red has a 44mm case made from titanium and an automatic movement. **£4,725; brm-chronographes.com**

APPROX £3k

Pequignet Concorde

This model's name reminds us of when Britain and France collaborated on a supersonic passenger jet. The watch, however, takes its name from the bracelet links, which are modelled on the obelisk in Paris's Place de la Concorde. **£3,120; pequignet.com**

UNDER £700

Depancel Série R

A French independent launched with a Kickstarter campaign five years or so ago, Depancel makes motorsport inspired watches, most of them with mechanical movements. This blacked out Série R is a 100-piece limited edition with a Japanese automatic movement. **£695; depancel.com**

UNDER £500

Baltic Hermétique Tourer Bronze

Baltic was founded a few years ago by a Frenchman honouring the memory of his father, of eastern European heritage, hence the name Baltic. This has an automatic movement, 37mm bronze case. **£498; baltic-watches.com**

The finest failures in automotive history

EPIC FAIL

MINARDI

WORDS: SAM PHILIP

minardi F1 team
FORMULA ONE TEAM

"I have not failed," Thomas Edison once said. "I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work." And when it came to winning Formula One races, no team found more ways that didn't work than Minardi, the plucky Italian outfit that, over 21 glorious years, became a byword for wholehearted motorsport failure.

A family business, Minardi competed in Formula Two in the early 1980s. The fact this yielded no great success failed to dissuade the team from stepping up to F1 in 1985, where it continued its admirable strategy of 'losing, but enthusiastically'.

The stats are impressive, just not necessarily in a good way. Over two decades in F1, Minardi contested 346 races and some 20,000 laps in total. Championships? Zero. Wins? Zero. Podium finishes? Also zero.

The closest the team came to flirting with victory was at the 1989 Portuguese Grand Prix, where lead driver Pierluigi Martini held first place for a grand total of... a lap. Minardi's zenith – the term is relative – arrived in the early 1990s, an era that yielded a hattrick of fourth place finishes.

But as the big budget teams became ever bigger, Minardi fell further to the back of the field. In 2005, the team was purchased by Red Bull, becoming Scuderia Toro Rosso. In just a couple of years, TR secured the win that had eluded Minardi for so long, a prepubescent Seb Vettel taking victory at the Italian Grand Prix. Heartwarming and all, but must also have stung a bit.

So, yes, Minardi was an epic failure. But also a noble one. Over its decades suffering the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, Minardi wore its backmarker status with grace and humour, earning a deserved reputation for championing the small teams, for engineering creativity, and for nurturing young talent including Fernando Alonso and Mark Webber. Sure, they bombed. But they bombed with passion, and a smile, and kept coming back for more.

> **"In F1, Minardi continued its admirable strategy of 'losing, but enthusiastically'"**

THRILLS WITHOUT THE BILLS

Fast(ish) cars you can actually afford

FORD FOCUS RS

(2016/17)

What is it?
A blue collar hero, but one that looks like it wants to eat a racetrack. If you can, Grasshopper Green is the colour to go for. Luridly excellent.

Why are we interested?
Because for under £20,000 you can get yourself an AWD, 350bhp proper tarmac terrorist Focus RS. Seems like a no brainer to us.

Kind of a cheap, modern restomod?
Yup. A well sorted and revived RS has to be more attractive than the latest warm hatch.

How many are there?
RS? MkI, 4,500-ish with 2,150 in the UK. MkII was 11,500 with 4k in the UK, 500 fewer built of the MkIII with the same sold here.

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100% GENUINE QUESTIONS

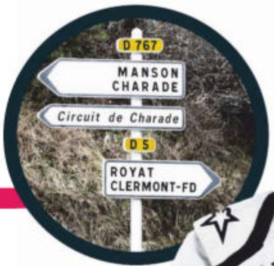
HELP!

The internet's most searched questions, rudely answered by us

WORDS: SAM PHILIP

THIS MONTH: **MICHELIN**

1. Where do Michelin tyres come from?



From the sap of the Pará rubber tree – also known as *Hevea brasiliensis*, sharing a tree or rubber plant – which grow over 40 metres tall and can be tapped after... oh, you mean where in the world? In which case, the city Clermont-Ferrand in France: not an area – so far as *TopGear* is aware – in which Pará rubber trees grow naturally or indeed at all, on account of not being a South American rainforest. But let's not get hung up on that: after all, when did you last see a tea plantation in Yorkshire?

2. Why does Michelin do stars?

Fair question. Why does a company that produces grippy wrappers for your car wheels also hand out coveted stars to the world's fanciest restaurants? You certainly don't see Kwik Fit dishing out gongs for fine champagne.

The answer? Marketing. At the dawn of the 20th century, Michelin's founding brothers figured they could increase demand for their bold new car tyre venture by publishing a guide to the best national eating establishments: establishments best visited with the help of a 'car', which ran best with the fitment of some 'tyres'. Genius!

Little could the brothers have known that, a century later, the Michelin name would become a byword for teeny tiny portions of insanely expensive food, mostly served in an opal encrusted egg cup or child's ballet shoe.

3. Do Michelin stars expire?

No, Michelin stars do not expire, but they can become worn over time, reducing their effectiveness. We suggest you should please regularly check your Michelin stars for signs of wear and tear, and replace them if they have less than 1.6mm of tread remaining.

4. Why does the Michelin Man look like that?

Because he's here to haunt your dreams. Warning: if you find today's Michelin Man a little... unsettling to behold, *TopGear* strongly advises not searching online for images of the 19th century original. Makes Pennywise look like Paddington Bear.

NUNC est bibendum
A VOTRE SANTÉ
LE PNEU MICHELIN BOIT L'OBSTACLE
MICHELIN

5. Does the Michelin Man give Michelin stars?

Really hung up on the Michelin Man, huh? Reasonable. Well, Michelin has long maintained its stars are awarded by team of anonymous human inspectors. Which may be true, but we all know the Michelin Man himself is the brains of the operation, gorging as he does upon the crushed hopes and dreams of innocent restaurateurs.

6. What is the Michelin Man's real name?

TG applauds the suspicion inherent in this question. Yeah, why *should* we let that dude hide behind his stage name? Let's see a birth certificate! And why not rake through his tax returns while we're at it? Anyhow, turns out the Michelin Man does have a real name, and it is... Bibendum. Which, of course, is Latin for 'ghostly creepy pillow-demon'.

IMAGE: MANUFACTURER, GETTY

Pub ammo
While the Golf GTI was launched in Europe in 1976, it didn't arrive in the US until the early 1980s

ROB DAHM'S AMERICAN TUNED

A maxed out Volkswagen Golf GTI MkVIII

We head to Texas to check out BMP Tuning's Pomelo Yellow GTI...

FOUR DECADES HAVE PASSED, GIVE OR take, since Volkswagen Golf GTI owners in the States started bolting on Koni shocks, Monza dual tip exhausts, and Kamei body kits. (Not to mention adding Fittipaldi steering wheels, Blaupunkt Berlin stereos, and Escort radar detectors by the score.)

No doubt, the Vee Dub tuning community has grown a bit since then. MkVIII GTI owners enjoy a bounty of bolt-ons that make a 1980s aftermarket catalogue look sparser than the Five Guys menu. But how to choose the right gear? What if you just bolted on everything?

Sorting through a bevy of bolt-ons is the theme of this episode of *TopGear*: *American Tuned*. With Autrey McVicker, owner of BMP Tuning, a Dallas-area VW mod shop and parts distributor, we pore over one MkVIII that's been the shop's test bed for everything on offer.

McVicker and his team have spared no effort with this hotted up Golf. As it stands, the GTI now features the full Verkline catalogue, including front and rear tubular subframes, various arms, and an airlift suspension system. Engine improvements include standard stuff like upgraded charge piping, intercooler, intake and coil packs and plugs.

Visually, the GTI has got an extensive makeover with splitters, side skirts and a rear diffuser. The attention to bolt-on detail extends to the Seibon hood and custom cut three-piece wheels, demonstrating the blend of performance and style that has come to define this ongoing build.

More significantly for our purposes, this GTI's journey from stock to 321bhp/350lb ft kitchen sink reflects a typical path for enthusiasts, starting with basic modifications like intake, downpipe and tune, to more advanced changes like suspension and wheels. What sets it apart is not just its upgraded components but the philosophy behind its transformation. It's about real world testing, pushing boundaries and, most importantly, supporting a passionate community dedicated to the art of personalised tuning.

When you've got a track day on Sunday, holiday on Monday

Now go and watch the video

MYTH BUSTER

"4WD IS THE BEST THING TO HELP YOU TO DRIVE IN A SNOWSTORM"

WORDS: PAUL HORRELL

A TRIP OUT OF CALAIS DOWN FRANCE'S A26 any time from Christmas to Easter will put you in a convoy of UK plated cars with ski boxes on the roof. Very many of them will have AWD. Too many will come back with body damage. See, 4WD will get you up a mountain better than 2WD. Double the traction. But it'll make not the slightest difference to how you come down. Exactly the same braking ability. Or lack of it.

You'll notice your ski guide turns up at the bottom of the lift in a careworn Renault Kangoo not a shiny Audi Avant quattro. That's not just because you don't pay them enough. Look. They'll be on winter tyres, which are more critical in snow than 4WD.

Remember, traction – or rather longitudinal grip – is a two way thing. It applies in the positive and negative direction. Positive is the traction, and negative is the braking. Your summer tyred 4WD might make you feel smug on the uphill. It has doubled its positive longitudinal grip versus a 2WD car by the simple expedient of having double the wheels sharing the load. But its negative grip hasn't improved one bit because you always had four wheel brakes.

Obviously once you've put your chains on – you *did* bring chains? – it doesn't matter what tyres you've got. But when the snow has mostly melted and you've taken the chains off again, there will always be icy or snowy patches that didn't melt because they're under trees or on bridges. Then you'll want all the braking you can muster.

Of course, away from the bliss of a winter holiday and back on Britain's greasy winter roads, 4WD can make you feel invincible accelerating out of a slow corner or roundabout, giving you the impression the surface is less slippery than it is. Again beware, because you might discover when you have to brake suddenly that you're actually wholly vincible.

Even when it's dry but on the shivery side of about 7°C, the rubber compounds in winter tyres will improve grip. Their tread deals better with mud and rain too. That said they tend to corrupt the steering slightly and add a bit of shimmer to the ride. Still, from a safety angle they're well worth the money. And anyway having a set costs less money overall than you might think. That's because for every day your car is on winter tyres, its summer set are sitting in your shed not wearing out.

#9

THE VAPOURWARE FILES

THIS MONTH:
LOTUS ETERNE

What is it?

One of the glut of six new Lotus models promised during the company's bizarre Dany Bahar led reveal binge in the autumn of 2010. Perhaps the most controversial, alongside a new Esprit supercar, Elise sportster, two-door coupe and more, was a four-door super saloon set to challenge the new Porsche Panamera.

Did they build any?

No – this strange chapter in Lotus history ended in firings, legal wranglings and Lotus going back to making winged Elises and Exiges until the Chinese money came along. The closest any of the new models got to existing was a prototype V8 for the new Esprit being bolted into a Ferrari 458 test mule.

Where are they now?

Well here's the funny thing: for all the stick that this 1,850kg barge took 15 years ago, Lotus is currently desperate to punt both a four-door saloon (the Emeya) and an SUV (the Eletre). The EV twins both tip the scales at 2.5 tonnes. Careful what you wish for...

MHD
WATCHES

BRITISH AUTOMOTIVE DESIGNED WATCHES
BY MATTHEW HUMPHRIES DESIGN

MHD Watches are designed in the UK by Automotive Designer Matthew Humphries, who at 21 was made the Chief designer at Morgan Motor Company. Matthew is best known for designing cars such as the stunning Morgan Aeromax, Morgan Aero Supersports and the Morgan 3 wheeler. Established in 2014, MHD Watches are an independent British watch micro brand who produce limited edition motoring inspired watches. Starting from £595 including free worldwide shipping.

Join our mailing list for early access to new MHD watch releases, events and exclusive offers at www.mhdwatches.com

www.MHDwatches.com

TOP 9 UNDERWHELMING ENGINE BAYS

WORDS: GREG POTTS

LOTUS EXIGE S2

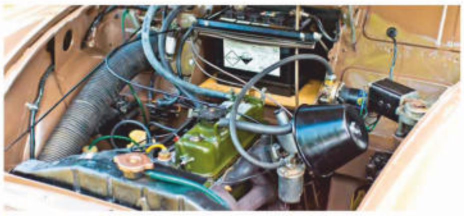
Mid-engined sports cars may be beautifully balanced, but it's very tricky to show off the engine when it's buried deep in the car. Lotus swapped the K-series engine for Toyota's 2ZZ-GE four pot when it launched the Series 2 Exige, but it didn't look all that exciting with the cover popped up.

PORSCHE BOXSTER 981

If you need to read the manual or watch a YouTube video to remove your engine cover, it's probably not going to be the most glamourous engine bay. Dig down below the roof mechanism and the third gen Boxster's powerplant is not a looker.

LEXUS LS 500

Lots of carmakers fill their engine bays with black plastic covers these days (the supercharged V8 F-Type R springs to mind), but none seem to have gone as far as Lexus with the current LS 500. There is actually a twin-turbo 3.4-litre V6 under there, but you wouldn't know it.



MORRIS MINOR

Perhaps an outlier on this list because you might not be expecting much excitement under the bonnet of a Morris Minor, but even so the dinky little A-series engine in the Minor 1000 looks lost in there. Heck, an LS V8 might even fit in that gap. Now there's an idea...

JAGUAR XJS

Ask most hypercar creators and they'll tell you that big V12s shouldn't just sound like a work of art, they should look like one too. Unfortunately, the world forgot to mention this to Jaguar in the 1970s. Open the bonnet in an XJS and you'll find a maze of wires and hoses.

FORD CAPRI 1300

Because the original Ford Capri was designed to take an Essex V6, when it was equipped with the teeny pre-Crossflow Kent four cylinder engine things certainly looked a little less... impressive. With under 50bhp, performance wasn't exactly mindblowing either.

PORSCHE 911

From the water cooled 996 generation onwards, if you open the rear letterbox of a Porsche 911 you won't see much of the flat six engine. In fact, you won't see much at all. Both the 991 and the current 992 only let you ogle a couple of fans.

everrati
ELECTRIFYING ICONS
everrati

EVERRATI GT40

If you encountered this GT40 in the wild and politely asked to see under the rear clamshell, you'd be pretty disappointed to find a load of orange high voltage cables and a metal box with some electric gubbins in it. The perils of the EV restomod.

FORD BRONCO RAPTOR

With its chunky arches and amber daytime running lights, the Bronco Raptor looks pretty mean. Its 412bhp twin turbo 3.0-litre V6 is pretty punchy too, but open the bonnet and even a top mechanic would struggle to find the actual engine under all of those hoses.

MIKE'S CHANNEL

Q: CAN SIM RACING HELP 'PROPER' RACERS?

I renewed my racing licence in December. Not because I'm batting away calls from racing teams desperate to secure my services based on my mediocre iRacing results, but because if I didn't renew it before the end of 2024, it would expire and I'd have to do the test again. Not something that tends to keep Lewis Hamilton up at night, I'd imagine. He's probably lying awake, staring at the ceiling, worrying about which special edition, one of a kind Ferrari he's going to spec to drive to work this year.

Going through the renewal did make me reflect on the one and only season of motor racing I completed, back in 2018, and how it related to the sim racing that has made up the bulk of what could be generously referred to as 'my racing experience'. For a start, there's no doubt that the reason I ended up lining up on a real life grid was racing games. My love of motorsport is inextricably linked to driving games. I'd watch motor races or rallies as a kid, then seek out the games that featured those cars and tracks, or I'd play the games and discover racing series I never even knew existed. Like most Westerners, I only became aware of the unhinged brilliance of the Japanese Super GT series after trying to cling onto the TOM's Castrol Toyota Supra in *Gran Turismo*.

The car I chose to race in was a Ginetta G40, in an entry level series set up by Ginetta specifically for first timers. The car itself was a great learning tool, a modest 135bhp but in a lightweight spaceframe chassis and with no driver assists. My genuine concern ahead of the season was that going racing would spoil sim racing for me forever. If anything, though, it made me appreciate how close modern sims get to replicating the vehicle dynamics and sense of competition you feel in real life. The other question was where I'd finish, with my aforementioned deeply average skills – whether the standard would be higher than your average chaotic multiplayer race. In reality the spread of abilities was much the same and I was mid-pack, making exactly the same niggling, pace sapping mistakes as I do on the sim.

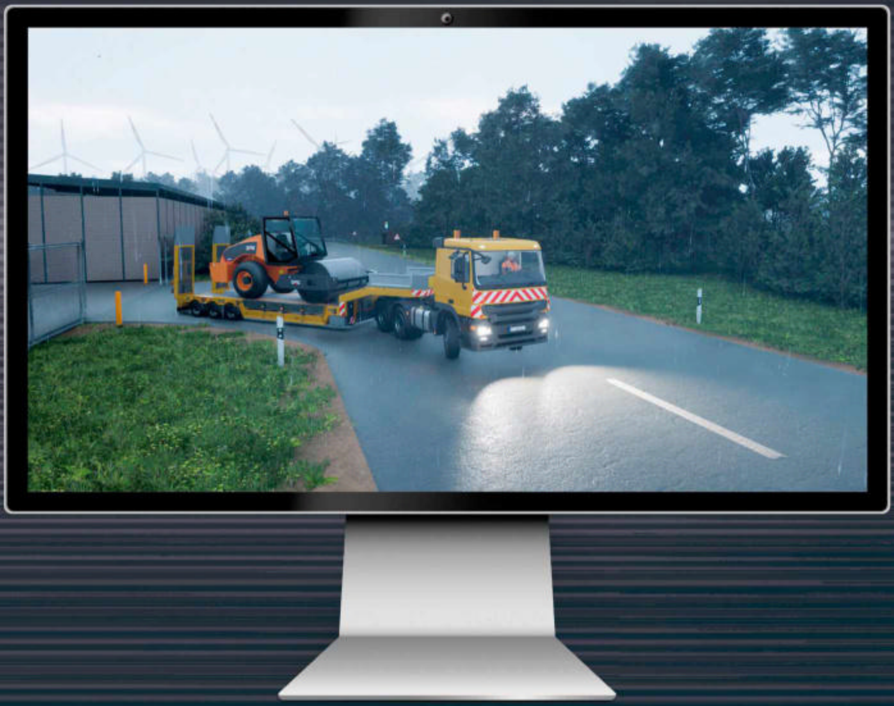
Where the sim came in really useful was learning tracks I wasn't already familiar with. I'm not sure I'd turned a lap at Snetterton since *TOCA Touring Cars 2*, but with iRacing's laser scan and a Pontiac Solstice standing in for the Ginetta, I was able to work out the lines and posted my joint best result of the season. Don't get too excited, it was 7th.

Unfortunately it might be a while before I race again. Ginetta's entry level championships are now via its G56 GTA, which looks like great fun to drive but, at around £100k for the car and a season, it prices me out. Still, at least I can drive my G40 in both *Forza Motorsport* and *Automobilista 2* on several of the circuits I competed on. It'll definitely do for now...

Mike Channell is a TG writer, multimillion subscriber YouTuber and occasional racing driver. Not evidence of a strong work ethic, just an attention span obliterated by too many video games

ILLUSTRATION: WALTER NEWTON

GAME OF THE MONTH



ROAD MAINTENANCE SIMULATOR 2

£25, PlayStation/Xbox/PC

Another addition to the genre of almost hypnotically boring job simulators, *Road Maintenance Simulator 2* tasks you with repairing the virtual roads you'd usually be racing around. You'll be dabbling in everything from pruning trees to clearing snow, and placing road signs. There's even complete freedom to run wild with the line painter, if you've ever wanted to make a T junction look like a schoolboy's exercise book. There's a sort of mindless, rudimentary fun to be had until you run up against some bug or poorly explained feature, at which point you come to a dead stop and have to reckon with how you're spending your limited time on Earth. Not recommended, then, but on the other hand if you really think about it, the entire purpose of a videogame is to provide an escapist fantasy. In this case it's the unattainable dream of roads where the potholes have actually been repaired. **MC**

GEAR

12
58
Wed 27
73

FITBIT INSPIRE 3

store.google.com; £59.99

Fancy a lightweight fitness tracker that monitors everything from your heart rate to sleep cycles, lasts a week on a single charge and won't cost a fortune? The Fitbit Inspire 3 is a solid choice with its crisp, easy to navigate screen that's ideal for consuming small amounts of data.

MORRFLATE QUAD-TYRE INFLATION/DEFLATION KIT

morrflate.com; from $185

Airing tyres down for off-roading means more rubber in contact with the ground, which means more grip. But dropping pressures (and reinflating after) is time consuming. This super sturdy kit lets you do all four tyres at once in seconds, with just a couple of button presses. Nifty.

SUUNTO AQUA

suunto.com; £175

Keen swimmer looking for just a tad more motivation? These open ear, bone conduction waterproof headphones feature 32GB of offline audio storage so you can leave your phone at home. Plus, a motion detection feature and the accompanying app acts as a swim coach to improve your form.

THE 10 COOLEST CARS OF 2025
BBC TopGear
ASTON VALHALLA!
1,064BHP SON OF VALKYRIE IS A HALF-PRICE HYPERCAR

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BOV

JETHRO
BOVINGDON

Should you own your hero… if it's a Citroen SM, asks JB

The day you become the owner of a Citroen SM should be a good day. It is a stunning creation. Elegant yet bewildering, ingenious yet flawed, prescient yet ultimately a dead end – the SM is genuinely unique and almost impossible to describe. Other than to say it is wilfully, brilliantly, infuriatingly and gloriously French. So, so French. But it has an Italian (Maserati) engine. Like I said, the SM confounds at every turn. It is something else entirely.

In case you're unfamiliar with the SM, I'd encourage you to have a poke around the web and drink in the sheer insanity of it all. The short version is that it's a front-engined GT car launched in 1970 that built on the innovations of the DS saloon and combined them with Maserati power, since the French firm had acquired the Italian blue blood in 1968. Its 2.7-litre V6 was built by Maserati, masterminded by Giulio Alfieri – whose previous work included the V8 powering the 250F F1 car – and powered the front wheels through a 5spd manual.

The engine snarls like an old prototype sportscar, but the hydropneumatic suspension soaks up bumps better than a modern Rolls-Royce. There's an unbelievably pointy fully hydraulic power steering system (power operated, not power assisted) with variable weighting yet the car rolls ferociously in corners, so you have to be impossibly delicate with inputs. Oh, and the brake 'pedal' is really a mushroom-shaped button that acts like a switch. The interior is somewhere between chic Parisian smoking lounge and the waiting room for intergalactic travel as imagined in the late 1960s.

> "It is unique and almost impossible to describe. Other than to say it is wilfully French"

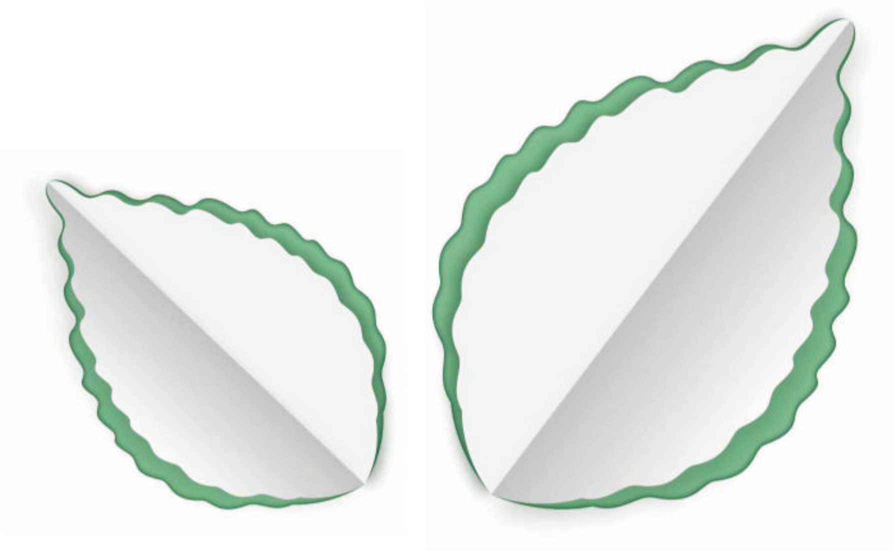
At the front, six headlights are encased behind curved glass that runs the entire width of the car. The innermost pair turn with the wheels. Its teardrop shape and abrupt Kamm tail create an extremely low drag shape and rock solid, high speed stability. The hydraulic front/rear brake balance adjusts according to the load of the car and under heavy braking the whole car squats rather than the nose diving. It's a surreal experience. Not because everything is so different, but rather because it all starts to feel natural so quickly. Citroen reimagined every dynamic facet of a car and, incredibly, came up with a pretty convincing alternative.

Of course, they caught fire. And the aircon was driven from the same timing chain that controlled the camshafts and could seize the engine. And it was ruinously expensive, plus the rear seats are tiny and, well, the list goes on. But the SM is properly, genuinely extraordinary. And now I own one. Or part own one, at least.

But that rueful day wasn't a good one. The SM was my dad's and now he's gone. Nothing, in his mind, could match the SM. His father bought a new SM back in 1971 and ever since he'd dreamed of having a Maserati powered Citroen. When he finally achieved his ambition, the reality somehow exceeded all those years of anticipation. It provided him with joy on every journey. He read books about the SM. He peered at it in the garage in the winter. Polished it in the summer. And drove it whenever he could. We should all be so lucky to find our version of the SM. The car that perfectly matches our passion and feeds our addiction. We'll look after her, Dad.

Host of TopGear America, Jethro has driven most things, mostly sideways, and forged a reputation as one of the world's most fearless road testers. Only one thing terrifies him – electric cars

PHOTOGRAPHY: TOM BARNES



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NATALIE PINKHAM

PINKS

Six new faces should spice up the F1 grid, says Natalie

After a few years of F1 drivers being less keen to leave their seats than United fans after an away win at City, there's a huge buzz around the changing of the guard in 2025. Six, yes *six* rookies will be joining the sport. So what impact will the class of 2025 make?

Filling a seven-time world champion's shoes is tall order, but 18-year-old Italian prodigy Andrea Kimi Antonelli is an audacious talent, with a glittering karting career behind him. A member of the Mercedes junior team since 2019, I interviewed him back in 2022, and despite his diminutive age (and stature) he has a calm confidence about him. He blitzed F4 and has won in F2. But his free practice debut at the 2024 Italian Grand Prix ended in the barriers after only one (albeit blistering) lap. Expect to see a handful of rookie mistakes from lil' Kimi, but also flashes of the brilliance that made Mercedes take the leap of faith.

Jack Doohan is son of motorbike racing legend Mick. The 21-year-old Aussie has been biding his time as reserve driver at Alpine after cutting his teeth in F2. He told me how excited he was to perform in front of his home fans in Melbourne. He'll be feeling the heat of Franco Colapinto breathing down his neck though; the Argentinian has been signed from Williams as Alpine's super sub.

> **"There's a huge buzz around the changing of the guard in 2025 with six rookies joining the sport"**

Oliver Bearman becomes the fourth British driver on the grid for 2025 and made a sublime stand in performance for Ferrari in Saudi 2024. He also turned heads with a strong showing for Haas in Baku. He has now secured a full term seat at Haas, but needs to leverage this experience. Expect him to score vital points in 2025, putting him in the shop window for a future seat with Ferrari. Incredibly, he only came 12th in F2, which proves the tidal wave of talent waiting to break through. Could one Brit eventually replace another at the Scuderia? Stranger things have happened.

Is Liam Lawson the answer to Red Bull's perennial second driver problem? It was time for Perez to go, but this is a seat that's chewed up and spat out more than one talent. He told me that he wasn't prepared to be on the sidelines for another year, so Red Bull had to recruit him or risk losing him forever. As far as team boss Christian Horner is concerned, he needs to score regular podiums, and after his feisty interaction with Alonso at the US GP, it's clear he won't be intimated by superstars on the grid.

Brazilian F2 champ and McLaren junior Gabriel Bortoleto is a fantastic signing for Sauber, which has swapped Bottas for youth alongside the experience of teammate Hülkenberg. Unlike Antonelli, Gabriel Bortoleto has the benefit of being out of the spotlight when he steps into F1.

Isack Hadjar completes the lineup, joining Racing Bulls. His personality is a ray of sunshine and he's proved himself as a racer with F2 wins at Imola, Spa and Silverstone. But he has a fiery side too – and he's lining up alongside a scorned Yuki Tsunoda, who was overlooked for Red Bull promotion. Sub-plots are everywhere, then. But among these six, future stars – and champions – are likely to lurk.

Natalie Pinkham is first and foremost a motorsport nut, but also a presenter for Sky Sports F1. Nobody knows more about the sport, or has better behind-the-scenes access to the paddock and drivers

PHOTOGRAPHY: TOM BARNES

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THE HOT

HATCH IS DEAD.

LONG LIVE THE HOT HATCH

The hot hatch is at a crossroads, with the old guard being run out and the new electrified era only just being ushered in. Is there hope left?

WORDS OLLIE MARRIAGE **PHOTOGRAPHY** MARK FAGELSON

Anglesey, early January and the sun's not long up. The point is we can tell. There it is, in the sky, golden fingers of light reaching down in front of Snowdonia. Which is currently living up to its name. We're heading that way tomorrow, but let's not worry about that now, because today our luck is in.

Truth be told, we've all been looking forward to this test since we toddled off to munch mince pies. Hot hatches. They're brilliant. They're also a rapidly dying breed for reasons that I... well... I, um, I just can't work out. We've got 10 cars here, and that's pretty much every hot hatch available today. A decade back we did a similar grab 'em all hot hatch test. In the end we had to cap it at 20 cars. Several core firms from then no longer build a hot hatch at all. Ten years from now, will anything be left of a class of car which is not only central to the lives of every car nut, but remains every bit as relevant today as it's ever been?

God knows what's going on. No fast Peugeots any more, Ford's commitment fatally wavering, RenaultSport has disappeared altogether, the hot Civic and Yaris built in limited numbers to appease CO_2 limits, not a halfway house hybrid in sight anywhere here. It's not a rosy picture is it?

But let's not drag ourselves down too far. Because we have 10 cars (seven combustion, three electric), all of them available new today, all of them worth the billing and, in the Alpine A290, a reason to be hopeful. It's electric, but the right size, the right attitude, the right wheel drive. It's faithful to what's gone before, shines a light into the future and, you'll be shocked to learn, has something in common with those rorty Renaults of old.

The suspension has been done by people who know hot hatches. I drove it up here across the heart of Wales yesterday and discovered there's a verve to the damping that speaks of good things underneath. It doesn't feel heavy in your hands, there's a hint of keenness, plus decent front end bite.

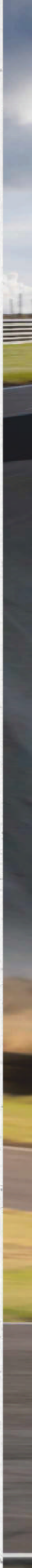
One of the first things to do at Anglesey is gather it together with our other EVs, Hyundai's Ioniq 5 N and the Cupra Born VZ. There are disputes about the Renault's – sorry Alpine's – clumsily overwrought styling additions, it's not as neat as the 5 that's for sure, but we forgive an awful lot for rally style driving lamps and, as I had discovered on the drive up, at least it's the right size. Mostly. It's actually wider and taller than the Golf, but a sense of supermini perspective is regained by driving it alongside the enormous Ioniq 5 N.

One of the things we need to talk about in this new age of hot hatches is how to actually define them, and there's a lot about the 4.7 metre long, 2,225kg Hyundai that's more SUV than hatch. The proportions are hatchlike, the scale isn't. And it has the power of a supercar, over 300bhp more than anything else here. But it's a question of approach and demeanour and the imaginative 5 N has proved itself time and again.

By the end of the day it will have turned in the fastest lap of all, but when we just head out on track and drive it none of us go for max attack mode, but instead engage N e-shift and play with the 'gearbox'. The way it manages torque, the artificial noise – it might not be as fast like this, but it draws you into the experience, opens up new dimensions.

And that's where the Alpine suffers. On a smooth track you don't really notice what the damping is doing, but you do notice the lack of noise, drama and vitality from the drivetrain. There are soundtracks, but they're too muted, it's a one tone drone from the moment you scrabble out of one corner to the moment you brake for the next. And it's the same in the Cupra. It's swift and – ooh – RWD, but shorn of character in a way the Ioniq somehow isn't.

But what great engines remain among our seven combustion machines? You'd have looked to BMW in previous years, a sweet inline six driving the rear wheels. Not any more. Now it's a turbo four that's shorter on charisma and charm than the VW Group's version found, in slightly different states of tune, in both the Golf GTI and Audi S3.

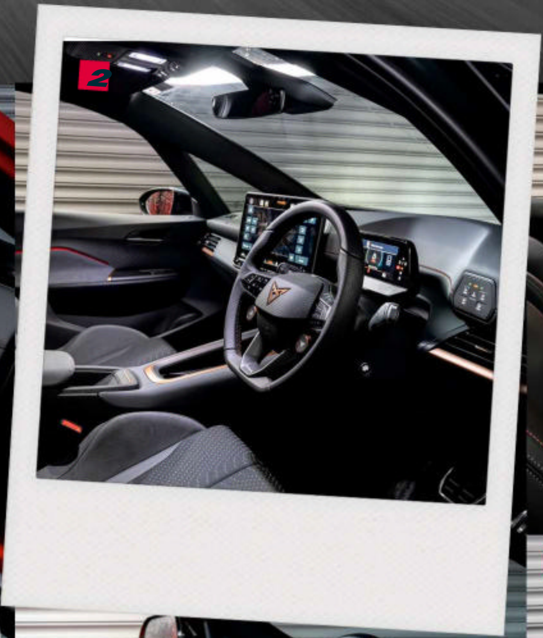


GZ-183-SL
KY74 JYO
IONIQ 5
N3 HYU

> “THEY’RE A RAPIDLY DYING BREED FOR REASONS THAT I JUST CAN’T WORK OUT”

Completely cremating the tyres is crucial before any hot lap attempt

> “THIS GENERATION OF MINI IS A SHADOW OF ITS FORMER SELF”



YH74 XGK
M135

1 Civic enjoys the best seats fitted to any road car, period **2** Pleasingly firm seats and steering wheel for the Born VZ **3** Fact: Audi fits this exact cockpit to every car it makes **4** BMW has worked hard to make the dash as illegible as possible **5** Confusing graphics aside, Alpine is well built and attractive

Thank God we can still rely on the Japanese. The smallest capacity here, the fewest cylinders, the most charisma, I adore the GR Yaris's engine. The way torque basically explodes at 2,500rpm, the grunting, gnashing engine note, the whole car vibrating with energy and keenness, giving all it's got to give.

The old one ran out of puff at the top end, but this new one, complete with 19bhp more, keeps hauling all the way – matching the 115mph peak speed of the 300+bhp BMW and Cupra before the heavy uphill braking zone into Rocket. For overall lap time it destroys them both and feels born to do it. This is the first automatic GR I've tested and I don't hate it at all. It's not even a twin clutch, but it feels like one, popping the shifts home the second you ask for them and generally feeling as up for it as the rest of the package. The price may have gone up, the hype may have died down, but this tight, together little charger of a hot hatch remains an addictive thing to drive.

In that it aligns itself with two other cars: the Focus ST Edition and the Civic Type R. Both are front drive with mechanical LSDs to get as much traction from the surface as they can. Important when it's about 2°C outside. The Focus is the back of the class paper dart thrower. It's extrovert and naturally talented, but a bit wayward, happy to lead you astray with its springy steering and torque steer. The Civic is head pupil, the sickeningly talented individual we all hate to love. That used to be eminently possible because of the way it looked. No longer. It's refined now and so is the driving experience.

The Civic is aglow with a sheen of engineering perfection. Every component in lockstep with every other, from seats and gearbox to differential and brakes. Harmony personified it flows around the circuit in a way nothing else here comes close to matching, carries more speed, grips harder under braking, communicates more clearly and evenly through steering and chassis. Yes, it has 265-width front tyres each 30mm broader than the Focus's, and that helps, but it should also mean more tramlining, more weave under braking, less accuracy and feel. Not for a second. It's just wonderfully flattering.

And also very, very lively. Something else it has in common with the Ford. These are the most grown up cars here, the Civic particularly liable to oversteer when trail braking into an apex. I completely overdrove it on the first timed lap and it was snatchy, ESP (which hovers in the background even when it says it is off) triggering jerkily, it felt like a car that shouldn't come out of hibernation until April at the earliest, when tyre temps have had a chance to blossom. Until I backed off the pressure and it shot round faster than everything bar a Hyundai that had twice the power. Still, it's very stiffly sprung in R+ mode, the closest the hot

LAP TIME / PEAK SPEED

Here's the deal: Ollie M driving, one lap of the shorter coastal layout, no tyre warming or other messing about. It's too cold for Jack and Andy timing it on their phones from the pit wall...

1	HYUNDAI IONIQ 5 N	1:17.62	121 mph
2	HONDA CIVIC TYPE R	1:18.96	120mph
3	TOYOTA GR YARIS	1:19.83	115mph
4	AUDI S3	1:20.09	120mph
5	VW GOLF GTI CLUBSPORT	1:20.57	119mph
6	FORD FOCUS ST EDITION	1:20.75	114mph
7	CUPRA BORN VZ	1:22.24	115mph
8	BMW M135	1:22.41	115mph
9	ALPINE A290	1:23.87	102mph
10	MINI COOPER S	1:26.95	105mph

"WE WERE SPOILED BY GOOD WEATHER AND THE VIEWS ANGLESEY DELIVERS LIKE NOWHERE ELSE"

The red pill or the blue pill? If you need more space there's the Hyundai Matrix

One wheel in the air is great – more than that and people get nervous

hatch class comes to providing a road going touring car.

The Golf GTI Clubsport wants to be a member of the Civic/Focus gang, but doesn't quite commit. Personally, I really enjoyed it. It has a level of track capability and finesse that surprised me, akin to the Civic in the smooth way it dragged itself out of tight corners. It delivers speed easily, demands little of its driver, but delivers quite a lot.

We got the three core Germans together, and I could see why most of my colleagues leant towards the S3 rather than the GTI. It has a 4WD system that – while not as active and engaging as the Toyota's – seems to have a similar mindset about how to get itself out of corners. Where's the understeer gone? That's what Audi S cars do best. Not anymore. The S3 has now gained the same trick torque splitting technology for the rear axle as the RS3, with an electronically controlled clutch on each rear driveshaft. The effects aren't as pronounced as in the RS, but that's good. Where the RS feels artificially enhanced, here in the S it's just plain effective. You exit corners neutrally and rapidly.

Which means it appears the Audi and BMW have basically swapped 4WD systems. In most BMWs, xDrive is rear biased, but the 1-Series is based on Mini technology and its 4WD system features a Haldex clutch setup that is front drive until it decides it needs a hand and, even then, can only send 50 per cent of its torque rearwards. The gearbox is lazy, the brakes aren't particularly strong, there's not much steering feel and little enthusiasm.

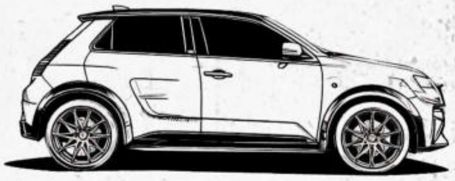
Unfortunately for the BMW Group, that's not the end of the bad news because this generation of Mini is a shadow of its former self. Of all the hot hatch misfirings we've had of late, this is surely the biggest. A Cooper S used to be tenacious, engaging. This one claims to drive like a go-kart, but is more ride on lawnmower, more bothered about its features and graphics than getting down to the task at hand. It's the cheapest car here by a long chalk, yet I drive it round Anglesey and realise within a lap that with its flaccid steering, hesitant gearbox and wooden brakes this is no longer a car aimed at people who love to drive. The writing was on the wall with the GP back in 2020, but the tumble down the order continues.

What's buoyant? The Cupra is surprisingly keen, the steering wheel firm in your hands, the suspension supportive, the seats both firm and supportive. Bravo to Cupra for not going 4WD, but instead sending 322bhp to the back wheels. You can tell. It's nicely balanced front to rear. But you sit high in a car that comes across as tall and narrow, which unpicks your confidence.

EF24 VOY
DRIVE THROUGH
PENALTY

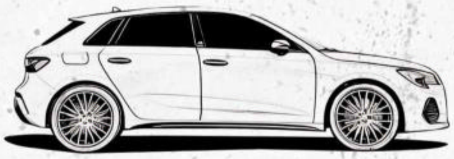
The Alpine has a similar issue inspiring confidence, but here it's the steering. There's no feel through the fat rim, it's too light, too vague. The suspension has a good go at giving some discernible texture, but inside the graphics are as daft as the Mini's, and there's a similar sense this is a car more concerned with looking cool – an urban hot hatch. It's the brightest, newest, shiniest thing for us magpies, yet I watched as one person after another jumped excitedly in and zipped out of the pits, but once they returned, didn't tend to go back to it. And it wasn't because they were worried about charge. It coped all day. And so did we, spoiled by good weather and the stunning views Anglesey delivers like nowhere else. It grows dark, we retire to pit garages to sort winners from losers.

> "THE GOLF HAS A LEVEL OF TRACK CAPABILITY AND FINESSE THAT SURPRISED ME"



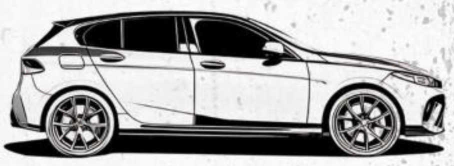
ALPINE A290

Price from: £38,500 **Engine:** single e-motor **Transmission:** 1spd, FWD **Power/torque:** 217bhp/221lb ft **Battery/range:** 52kWh/226miles **0–62mph:** 6.4secs **Top speed:** 106mph **Kerbweight:** 1,504kg **Power to weight:** 144bhp/tonne



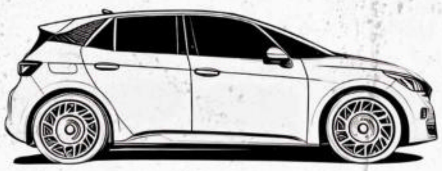
AUDI S3

Price from/as tested: £57,120/£61,840 **Engine:** 2.0T inline 4cyl **Transmission:** 7spd DCT, 4WD **Power/torque:** 328bhp/310lb ft **MPG/CO₂:** 33.2mpg/194g/km **0–62mph:** 4.7secs **Top speed:** 155mph **Kerbweight:** 1,610kg **Power to weight:** 204bhp/tonne



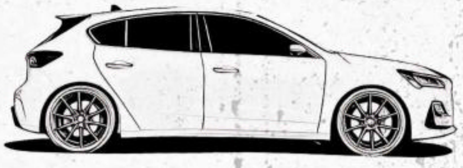
BMW M135

Price from/as tested: £43,600/£54,050 **Engine:** 2.0T inline 4cyl **Transmission:** 7spd auto, 4WD **Power/torque:** 292bhp/295lb ft **MPG/CO₂:** 36.2mpg/176g/km **0–62mph:** 4.9secs **Top speed:** 155mph **Kerbweight:** 1,550kg **Power to weight:** 188bhp/tonne



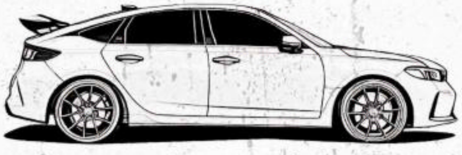
CUPRA BORN VZ

Price from/as tested: £44,625/£46,698 **Engine:** single e-motor **Transmission:** 1spd, RWD **Power/torque:** 322bhp/402lb ft **Battery/range:** 79kWh/366 miles **0–62mph:** 5.6secs **Top speed:** 124mph **Kerbweight:** 1,999kg **Power to weight:** 161bhp/tonne



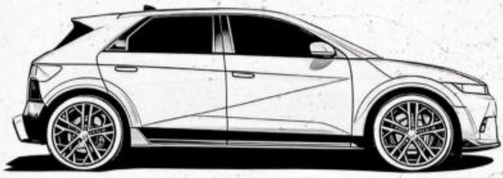
FORD FOCUS ST EDITION

Price from/as tested: £42,905/£44,105 **Engine:** 2.3T inline 4cyl **Transmission:** 6spd man, FWD **Power/torque:** 276bhp/310lb ft **MPG/CO₂:** 34.9mpg/185g/km **0–62mph:** 5.7secs **Top speed:** 155mph **Kerbweight:** 1,433kg **Power to weight:** 193bhp/tonne



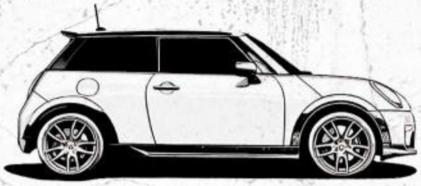
HONDA CIVIC TYPE R

Price from/as tested: £50,050/£50,700 **Engine:** 2.0T inline 4cyl **Transmission:** 6spd man, FWD **Power/torque:** 324bhp/310lb ft **MPG/CO₂:** 34.4mpg/186g/km **0–62mph:** 5.4secs **Top speed:** 171mph **Kerbweight:** 1,429kg **Power to weight:** 227bhp/tonne



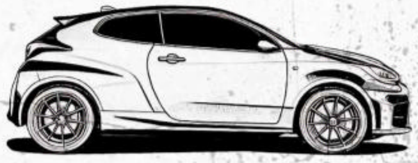
HYUNDAI IONIQ 5 N

Price from/as tested: £65,000/£65,000 **Engine:** twin e-motors **Transmission:** 1spd, 4WD **Power/torque:** 641bhp/545lb ft **Battery/range:** 80kWh/278 miles **0–62mph:** 3.4secs **Top speed:** 161mph **Kerbweight:** 2,225kg **Power to weight:** 288bhp/tonne



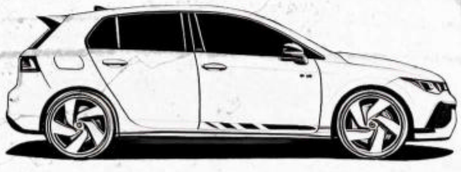
MINI COOPER S

Price from/as tested: £26,700/£34,600 **Engine:** 2.0T inline 4cyl **Transmission:** 8spd auto, FWD **Power/torque:** 201bhp/221lb ft **MPG/CO₂:** 44.1mpg/144g/km **0–62mph:** 6.6secs **Top speed:** 150mph **Kerbweight:** 1,285kg **Power to weight:** 156bhp/tonne



TOYOTA GR YARIS

Price from/as tested: £45,750/£46,390 **Engine:** 1.6T inline 3cyl **Transmission:** 8spd auto, 4WD **Power/torque:** 272bhp/288lb ft **MPG/CO₂:** 29.7mpg/215g/km **0–62mph:** 5.2secs **Top speed:** 143mph **Kerbweight:** 1,325kg **Power to weight:** 205bhp/tonne



VOLKSWAGEN GOLF GTI CLUBSPORT

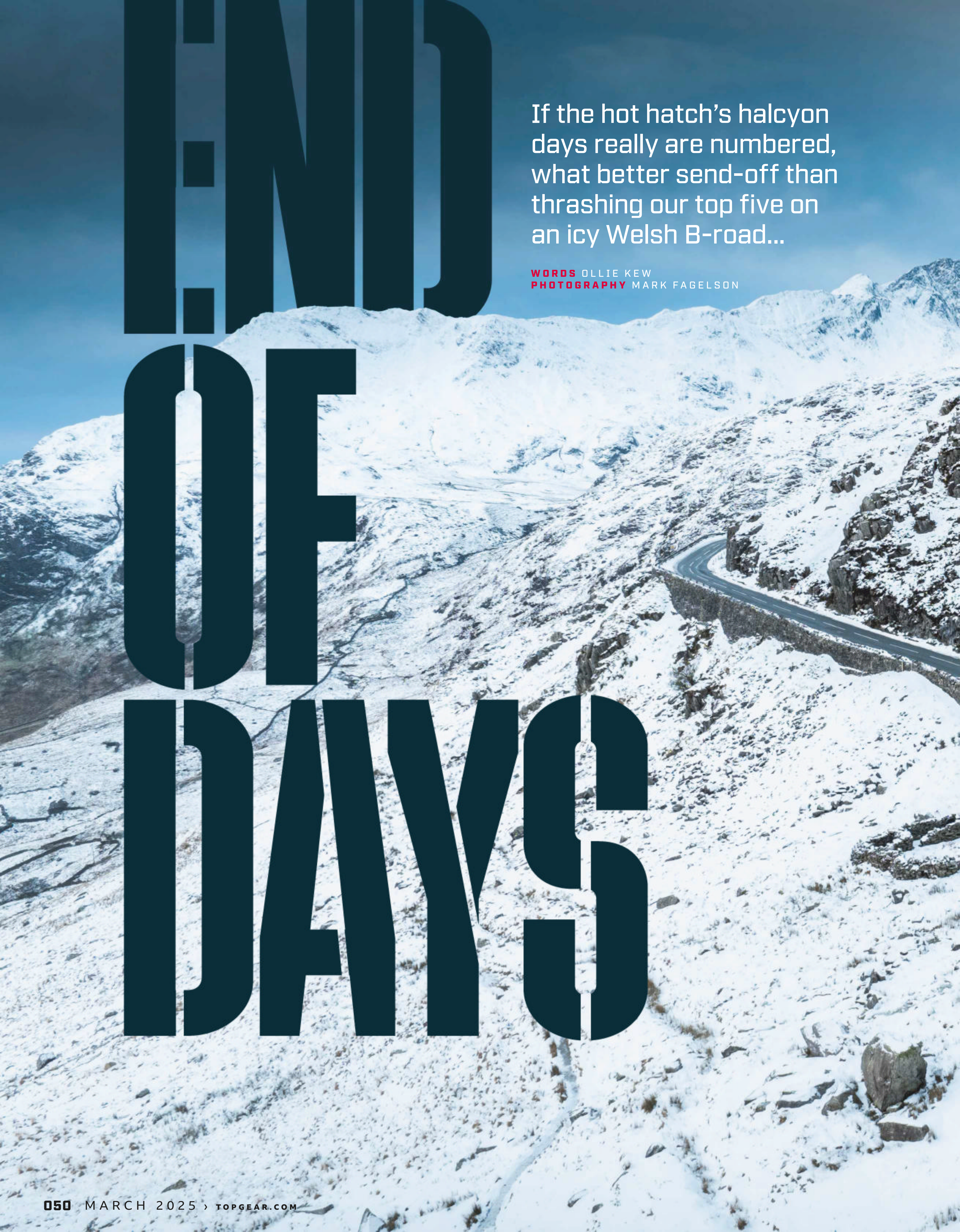
Price from/as tested: £42,780/£47,995 **Engine:** 2.0T inline 4cyl **Transmission:** 7spd DSG, FWD **Power/torque:** 261bhp/295lb ft **MPG/CO₂:** 37.4mpg/171g/km **0–62mph:** 5.6secs **Top speed:** 155mph **Kerbweight:** 1,459kg **Power to weight:** 179bhp/tonne

THE FINAL FIVE

So 10 came, but only five can go through to round two. The first three choose themselves quickly and easily. The GR Yaris remains the hot hatch honey badger, even when fitted with an automatic gearbox. The Civic Type R is 9/10ths touring car and the most polished yet addictive car here, while the Focus ST sits somewhere between the two – an old school entertainer. Long may Ford support its survival.

I vote for the GTI Clubsport, but more go for the S3. Fair enough. It's effective, well balanced and enjoyable in a way Audis so rarely are, even if it wears an RS3 price these days. And besides, having looked across the Menai Strait this morning, we need something with a fighting chance of pulling the rest of them out of a snow drift. One of the EVs deserves to go through – the only one that genuinely engages us and shows a way forward for the breed. The Ioniq 5 N is a super SUV crammed into a hot hatch costume and given a dizzying price tag, but it provides answers to hot hatch questions that the Alpine and Cupra don't. What are those questions? Over to Ollie Kew to explain.

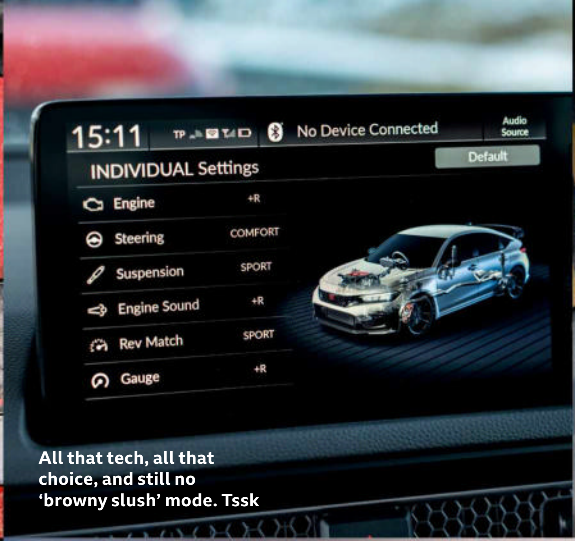
"THE GR YARIS REMAINS THE HOT HATCH HONEY BADGER"



END OF DAYS

If the hot hatch's halcyon days really are numbered, what better send-off than thrashing our top five on an icy Welsh B-road...

WORDS OLLIE KEW
PHOTOGRAPHY MARK FAGELSON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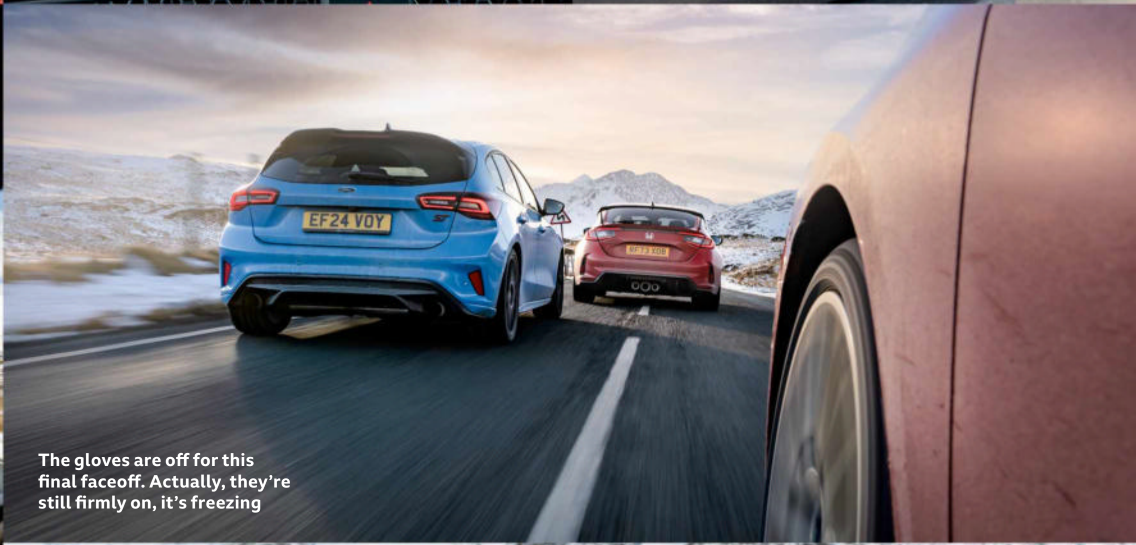
INDIVIDUAL Settings
Default
Engine +R
Steering COMFORT
Suspension SPORT
Engine Sound +R
Rev Match SPORT
Gauge +R

All that tech, all that choice, and still no 'browny slush' mode. Tssk


The gloves are off for this final faceoff. Actually, they're still firmly on, it's freezing

Ioniq really ought to pick on something its own size. Like an Evoque. Or a conservatory

In the cold light of day, our vibrant hot hatch final five gladdens a cynical petrolhead's heart. Five manufacturers. No platform sharers. We've got a supermini and four proper family cars. Two manuals (the Yaris would've been nominated regardless of the gearbox – the only car here to offer a choice) and an EV to break up the turbo monopoly. There's more diversity here than an episode of *Star Trek*.

But I'm uneasy. How is the most affordable car here the wrong side of £40k? And why is nothing in our final reckoning actually *new*? Sure, the Audi's fresh from a facelift, but there's nothing truly hot out of the oven. OK, there was the Alpine, but it's not quite *there* yet. Did we already reach peak hot hatch? Are we sliding inexorably down the other side into oblivion?

That's exactly how the day almost began, actually. Usually the Ioniq 5 N is content to be an SUV cosplaying a super hatch. This morning it performed a scarily accurate impression of a bowling ball on a waterslide.

I undocked it from the hotel charger early doors, noted its 100 per cent battery reckoning on a range of 160 miles, winced, killed the heater and whacked up the seat and steering wheel warmers instead – a more efficient way to thaw out when it's -2°C. As our convoy wove its way over the foothills of Snowdonia we'd cooed at from a safe viewing distance yesterday, it surprised me. It was early, I was sleepy, and not especially in the mood for digi-histrionics. So I left it in the silent Eco mode, whooshed along by instant torque, ignoring the brake pedal while regen took care of slowing down.

Christ, it was boring. Hyundai has been at pains to acknowledge all the fakery – the pops and bangs, the rev limiter, the 'gearbox' – is all switchoffable. None of *The Matrix* was forced upon you. But wow do you miss it when it's not there, and the N shapeshifts into just another e-crossover. Within a mile or two, I've defaulted back to my 'N Grin Shift' – a risible name, but a worthwhile distraction for my juvenile brain.

The make-believe gearbox comes in handy as we climb into the slush zone and the 2.3-tonne 5 N snatches and slithers to the rumble of powerless ABS. Basically, you can meter out regen resistance by 'downshifting' into higher revs and holding a 'gear', while avoiding a physical squeeze of the brakes. It's so accurately calibrated, you genuinely forget there's no DSG transmission reining you in: just zeroes and ones. Meanwhile, the pesky Yaris scampers off into the distance and I'm waving impatient locals in quattro Audis out of my wake.

No surprise then that Ollie Marriage looks chilled in the S3 when we convene at a frozen layby on the A498. Sam is positively beaming about how much fun the Toyota was on the commute up here. And Mark the photographer is politely asking if we're trying to bump him off by equipping him with a Focus ST wearing Pirelli's P Zero Corsa track focused tyres. "I thought one of you had turned off the traction control somehow," he says ruefully. "Wheelspinning *everywhere*."

The Civic's depending on less extreme rubber, and makes it along in one piece. The forecast promises a bright outlook, but while Mark captures grime encrusted closeups on the front drive stuff, the conditions are spot on for an AWD winter weapon.

So, I nip off in the Audi – the most surprising entry into the final five. Ollie Marriage argued the case for the Volkswagen Golf GTI but was outvoted, foiled because the 8.5 Clubsport doesn't really demonstrate a big leap of improvement over what's gone before. You could argue no GTI has since the MkV. Our collective favourite update is that the steering wheel is no longer a plastic hate crime of haptic nonsense.

The S3 still doesn't impress inside. It's angular and austere, the steering wheel is too big, its paddles feel cheap and the seats are a joke: hard, flat and as supportive as a drill sergeant. And they want 60 grand for this! On the outside, it's actually regained some Q car factor by dint of *all* Audis being so overstyled, and shunning a few S3 badges. So it's the least eventful car here. Climb into any of the others, vaulting tall bolsters and lairy stitching and the tone is set – "Righty ho, this is a performance car." This is more 'top of the range A3'.

It even catches hostile conditions unawares. It's a yes man, unflinchingly answering your commands: do this, go there, be fast, turn now. Away from the wide open spaces of the track the benefits of its RS3 inherited sport diff aren't as obvious, but it's a country mile away from the bad old days of one dimensional, Audi drear steer. If you want teleportation and equate value for money with extracting every molecule of oomph 365 days a year, the S3 is a terminator.

SNOWDONIA
TINY TRUCK
EXPEDITION

Where it has slack in its drivetrain and woolly gearbox reflexes, the Yaris charges past with panache. What a mighty little attack terrier – it ought to come as standard with a timeshare in a moorland cottage or mountain bothy, so you can spend your winters harrying anything exotic that's foolish enough to trespass on its patch.

Rowan's convinced it's not quite the hooligan the first GR was, expressing relief the handbrake still dislocates the rear driveshafts for yobbomatic moments. Can't say I'm feeling any dropoff in energy – the modes have been reworked so Gravel now splits the adaptive four-wheel drive evenly and you need Track mode for a yeehaw rear bias – but the sheer purchase it wrenches from glistening sub zero roads is astonishing.

Unlike the Audi, which runs out of damping when you really get going, the Yaris is firm but exacts stunning control and composure. Perhaps that's why some feel it's lost some of the playful puppy factor. I'm in love. The seat's lower (where it always ought to have been) the resculpted dash is nothing to look at but you've no longer got the forward visibility of a panzer and it even sounds fruity in a gruff, semi-industrial, three cylinder sort of way. And it's such a great *size* for a hot hatch, finding room to dance into where the Ioniq is kissing dry stone walls.

Ollie's in firm agreement the Toyota is a tonic, and despite being impressed by the flappy paddles we're all sure we'd prefer a manual while there's still the glimmer of the (£1,500 cheaper) option. But the Yaris has lost a little of its pocket hero lustre now it costs over £45,000 – it was a sniff over £35k when it shot to stardom in 2021. At that price, you might grumble harder about useless back seats, crap rear visibility and no back wiper. The lack of heated seats is earning it a pasting today.

Ford's are usually nuclear. These chairs are also supremely supportive and oh so comfy. So with the roads defrosted and drying, I get reacquainted with an old friend. Haven't driven a Focus ST since I spent eight months with our *TG* Garage long termer back in 2020, and in the space of about three gearchanges, I'm sold all over again.

It's not a polished car, the ST. It's jouncy and distracted. I take Ollie's point that it's lacking the professional gloss of the Civic but this is one of those increasingly rare cars that oozes character from flaws you suspect were deliberately left on the table. The torque steer, for instance. It's not going to wrench the chunky superheated wheel from your grasp, but it likes to remind you that entrusting the front wheels with the thick end of 300 horsepower is daft. The steering's springy, but for me that only encourages indulging the Ford signature move of an over exuberant turn in, a brief tripod wheel flourish, then let the wheel twang back to straighten everything out.

The stare of someone who's realised how well disguised the local sheep are

It's a little bit arcade-y. Silly and rough around the edges next to the scalpel sharp Civic. It feels like Ford's magnum opus was the Fiesta ST, and the attempt to splice as much of that car's DNA into its bigger brother brought on some slightly freakish side effects. But it asks interesting questions: do some hot hatches take themselves a bit seriously? Sure, we're spoilt by EV torque these days, but haven't you missed feeling this 2.3-litre just haul from idle? What a torque king. When it grows up, this fast Ford wants to be a muscle car like its cousins in Detroit.

I arrive back midway through an argument about authenticity. The Audi sports too many fake vents, though amazingly all four combustion cars here have real tailpipes. Rowan's been for a blat in the Hyundai and is unscrambling his tortured brain. "It's a lesson in sensory deprivation," he reckons. "The 'engine braking' isn't just useful, it's critical to the whole drive. Turn off all that rev counter and paddleshift stuff and you've got... nothing."

What you've got regardless is a car a size too big and a tonne too heavy to indulge itself here in hot hatch country, festooned with blind brows, yumps and off camber kinks. We start brainstorming a cherrypicked understudy to the 5 N: somehow shoehorning that play value into an EV the size of a Yaris. "It doesn't need 600 horsepower," Rowan insists, "250 would be fine – and make it front drive." We all applaud the Ioniq for the bravery of its ideas, and the N division's sheer force of will to commit to a project which could've sunk the entire skunkworks, irreversibly derided as a laughing stock of inauthenticity. The 5 N gets away with it because its special effects are so convincing. Rich in innovation, it offers hope. But it's not yet the car any of us would choose to take home and keep for the rest of our days. Nothing to do with the remaining 50-mile range...

Because while all the cars here have their small victories, over the weather, the road, and each other, nothing has the breadth of brilliance you find in the sensational Civic Type R. It's no recency bias that it makes our list not just of the best hot hatches of the moment, but the greatest of all time. This thing's a landmark for the ages. It deserves to have tapestries woven in its image and ballads penned in its name.

What's remarkable is how big a step it is from the old one, which also legged it with every award going and demolished the competition.

"DID WE ALREADY REACH PEAK HOT HATCH?"

Snowdon has been snowed on. Oh, how we laughed. Locals call it Yr Wyddfa

GRAEANU FFYRDD
GRITTING
N3 HYU

With this much power your teeth are as gritted as the local roads

GV24 UOH
EF24 VOY

Not quite as old as the hills, but funny how three of our faves are old school turbo nutters

All of its predecessor's sensational balance, grip and inherent toughness live on, buffed up with a mature, honed polish that's reflected in the more grown up looks, the rationalised cabin, and the bigger breadth of modes, with (at last) a 'mix and match' Individual mode. You can finally twin a rabid throttle with plush damping, and the result is just about the best British B-road car ever devised. Ruthlessly fast, but never aloof. And that gearshift. Wow. You'd never tire of such precision, even if it's a palm chafer when the mercury's below freezing.

And what of the whole scene, this first rung on the ladder of petrolhedonism? Like a winter's day, it feels like everything's getting dark early. I've consoled myself – and I'll share this forlorn hope with you – that the hot hatchback has treaded water through doldrums before and come back swinging.

Connotations of joyriders, ramraiders and stratospheric insurance premiums damn near killed the genre off in the mid-1990s.

RF73 XOB
EF24 VOY

There have been blips since – in the aftermath of the global recession Honda temporarily deleted the Type R. Dieselgate put paid to a 400bhp Golf R. Ford admitted in a statement as far back as 2020 that it couldn't justify a future for the Focus RS.

It's been a creeping dieback, now gathering pace like the 5 N did on the descent down Pen Y Pass this morning, because the donor cars themselves – the humble hatches – are on borrowed time. RIP Fiesta. No more Focus. Polo and Golf up for debate, while the likes of the Megane and Leon morph into bespoke EVs.

So… just buy one. Buy a hot hatch. Any one of these five. Or one of the past masters. Buy one, use it every day, enjoy it, tell your friends. Buy one as a protest vote. Buy one because they're rewarding, flattering, versatile daily drivers. Almost all of us will have a hot hatch story somewhere along the road. Hot hatchbacks are magical. We can't allow them to be left on ice. TG

A gearlever so good you just can't take your hand off it. Not when the knob is this cold…

KY74 EBU
GV24 UOH
N3 HYU

"ALMOST ALL OF US WILL HAVE A HOT HATCH STORY SOMEWHERE ALONG THE ROAD"

GET READY FOR LIFT-OFF (OVERSTEER)

TG's rough guide to hot hatches

THIS IS YOUR LIFE

Welcome to hot hatch memory lane – making the weekly shop fun since 1963

WORDS OLLIE KEW

1963

The hot hatch age begins... with a car that didn't have a hatchback. The Mini Cooper S had a tailgate, but it showed a small car with a peppy engine was a saleable (and rally winning) recipe

1976

The MkI Golf GTI kickstarts things here. Volkswagen never expected to sell more than 5,000. UK RHD sales start in 1979

1980

Renault begins its storied tradition of shoving a silly engine where the back seats of a little hatchback should go. R5 Turbo halo effect trickles into later (front engine) GT Turbo

1982

VW ups the ante with the 16 valve, 139bhp MkII Golf GTI. Ford gets its act together with Escort XR3i. Yuppies versus Essex: let battle commence!

1985

Peugeot's hot hatch high point arrives: the lightweight, ultra agile 205 GTI. Starts out as a 104bhp 1.6, with 128bhp 1.9 following in late 1986. Straight onto every joyrider's Christmas list

1992

Ford homologates Escort rally car with outrageous whaletail RS Cosworth. Design was supposed to be a triple deck spoiler!

1997

For the Japanese market only, the Type R dynasty is born. UK gets the next gen 'breadvan' high revving VTEC in 2001

2001

Renault once again shoves a big engine in the middle of a little car. Clio V6 is somehow even more spinnable than the R5 Turbo from 1980

2002

Best looking hot hatch ever? Ford's original 212bhp Focus RS uses clever Torsen diff and knuckles to tame rampant torque steer. Nearly succeeds

2003

Golf GTI MkIV is a real low point for VW, but the fourth Golf also spawns four wheel drive R32, world's first road car with a twin clutch gearbox. Imagine the hot hatch scene today without that...

2005

GTI back to its best with the fabulous 197bhp MkV. Arrives into a teeming class of 225bhp Meganes and av 237bhp Astra VXR. Insurance premiums for B-road hedgerows quadruple

2008

"What if you made a GT3 RS hot hatch?" thinks Renault and begins the Nürburgring lap time wars with caged, carbon R26.R

2009

While RenaultSport is busy losing weight, Ford decides to try 300bhp through the front wheels – 5cyl Volvo engine later upped to 345bhp for psycho RS500

2011

With the Evo/Impreza rally reps dead, the Germans invade hot hatchville with huge power ambitions. First RS3 has 335bhp and quattro AWD

2012

After decades in the quick supermini wilderness, Ford finally delivers with the stupendous Fiesta ST: cheap, practical and huge fun. Small wonder it was a TG Car of the Year

2017

Civic Type R made its turbo comeback in 2015, but we knew it was an afterthought. Successor is a masterpiece to drive, wrapped in a truly hideous body

2019

AMG pumps the hot hatch past 400bhp (and copies Ford's drift mode gimmick). Superb Megane Trophy-R jumps the shark with carbon wheels, ceramic brakes and a £75k price

2023

Does the synthesised brilliance of the 600bhp two tonne Ioniq 5 N change hatches forever? Future looks uncertain, but in the present, the Type R nears perfection

HOT HATCH HEROES

WORDS PAUL HORRELL

The pioneers who shaped the genre for us to enjoy

AMÉDÉE GORDINI

Racer, engineer, entrepreneur

One of those engineers (props too to Carlo Abarth) who took affordable mass made cars after WW2 and hopped them up for both racing and the road. A succession of big hearted, small engined Renaults bore his name – Dauphine, R8, R12, during which time Renault bought his company.

Next in that line was the MkI R5 Turbo Alpine (Gordini in the UK because Chrysler owned the Alpine name here). OK, he was in his 80s by then so had little to do with developing that car. But it bore his spirit.

It was by many definitions the first hot hatch – by weeks versus the Golf – and it spawned generations of hot hatches from Renault and later RenaultSport, which egged on rival Peugeot too.

JOHN COOPER

Cooper Car Co

Not a hatchback OK, but the original Mini, when Cooperised, was mad fun at a sensible price. All the ingredients were there. The basic Mini had insanely good handling and grip, and John Cooper had true racing pedigree, having been one of the first to make a mid-engined racer that took Stirling Moss to victory, then won the F1 world championship. Putting that expertise plus the nous of the BMC Competitions Department, into a Mini made a car that swept all before it.

Buyers accessorised the heck out of it and gave it legs for four decades. John Cooper and son Mike then had the smarts to get into bed with BMW, so he knew what was afoot: the year after he died the first BMW Mini Cooper emerged.

ERNST FIALA

Head of R&D, VW, 1973–1988

Fiala was head of research at VW from 1972, and stepped up to be chief engineer to bring the Golf to production. Forthwith, an afterhours skunkworks assembled with the notion of building a hot one. The team took its first prototype to Fiala… and he was actually a bit horrified.

He told them it needed to be far more driveable, less ornery, more usable. So when it came to production in 1976, that's what it was. It had all the crisp, solid quality and practicality of a Golf, real refinement, and the predictable pull of an injected engine, all wrapped in styling updates that stayed on the nifty side of flash. Which has defined the GTI, bedrock hot hatch, ever since.

HIDEKI KAKINUMA

Civic Type R large project leader

An archetype of the obsessive Japanese engineer. He finesses every measurable to the Nth degree. And with it there's a soulful – almost spiritual – dedication to the tactile and the intangible. Frantic, yet Zen too.

He led the 2017 FK8 Civic Type R. It followed the shortlived FK2, the first of the turbos. He refined the power, added the three outlet exhaust for sweeter sound, went bonkers on aero and ended up with a profoundly engaging machine. Yet by finessing the adaptive suspension he made it more liveable too.

And he did today's FL5. His add ons respect the less lairy shape, yet driving the thing you can be as lairy and you like and it just keeps rewarding more.

TILL WARTENBERG

VP/head N brand & motorsport, Hyundai

Wartenberg has been at N for years, and defined what his engineers were to do with the i30N and i20N. So when he started talking about an electric N you figured he'd know what petrolheads wanted.

The Ioniq 5 N isn't a hot hatch. It's SUV sized and weighty with it. But it shows, as his i30N and i20N did, that great sporty cars aren't all about speed or grip, but about the ability to paint you a grin. So it has a false engine sound, a meaningless rev counter and faked up gearchanges. It has 'set your own' torque distribution. Not because they make you faster, but because they're a past informed yet future facing exploration of the vitals of our connection with the machine.

When hot hatches go wrong

Proton Satria Neo Sport 2007

MG Maestro 1983

Peugeot 207 GTI 2006

Volkswagen Golf GTI MkIII 1992

Daewoo Kalos Blue 2003

REMEMBER WHEN...

Our all time best hot hatch memories

Jack Rix

INTO FOCUS

The hype had been deafening, we couldn't give it an easy ride. So we didn't, collecting it from the factory in Cologne in the depths of winter and hot footing it to the fabled cols of the Rallye Monte Carlo and back. Five days and over 2,000 miles of hot hatch punishment and ham fisted, computer assisted drifts. Bliss. In fact, surfacing this memory has made me scour the classifieds.

Ollie Kew

TROPHY WINNER

Austria, 2015. My first Speed Week. While my superiors squabble over who leads the Ferrari Speciale or Cayman GT4 back down the mountain, no one's fussed about Private Foetus over here strapping himself aboard Renault's new Megane 275 Trophy-R. Maybe because we'd warped the brakes into McCoy's crisps. I enjoyed one of the drives of my life and ironed the brake discs straight again.

Ollie Marriage

ALTITUDE SLICKNESS

Four Fords on the Col de Galibier. The XR3i couldn't cope with the altitude and kept stalling. The ST was so wayward it wanted to torque steer off the side of the mountain. The ST170 was deft but gutless. The new 2019 Focus ST was brilliant. Sometimes it's not about how good a car is though, it's about a gang of you together, in a stunning place, with amusing cars on great roads.

Tom Ford

HATERS GONNA HATE

I used to live in Greenwich. Well, I say that, but I actually resided on the margin of Greenwich and Deptford, but Greenwich sounded better. And one evening, I was accosted by a man who insisted that I'd "ruined" the Clio I was driving. "Can't you people just leave things alone?!" he exclaimed, pointing to the Renault's wide arches. But I had. It was a Clio V6. And completely standard.

AFTERMARKET

So you want to mod like it's the heyday of the hot hatch? Here's your handy guide...

WORDS TOM FORD

Step 1 – wheels
Pick your wheels. Probably something you should do later, once you've done all the other mods, but who does that? You can always change them later. At least two inches in diameter bigger than the biggest standard wheel. At least. A 205 on 20s rocked our worlds.

Step 2 – pipes
Immediately ditch the standard exhaust for something that sounds like a hornet sellotaped to a microphone, trapped in an amplifier. Peco Big Bore 4 should do it. Everything has to be bolt on in the best tradition of garage mechanics everywhere.

Step 3 – slam it
Get some lows. Coilovers should get it sitting right for a hardslam, airbags only for the stance crowd. Or just cut the springs, right? Stretch 'n' poke and camber wasn't really a thing back then. Or just use cups if you want to drop an inch or two. Roll your arches with a baseball bat. It actually works.

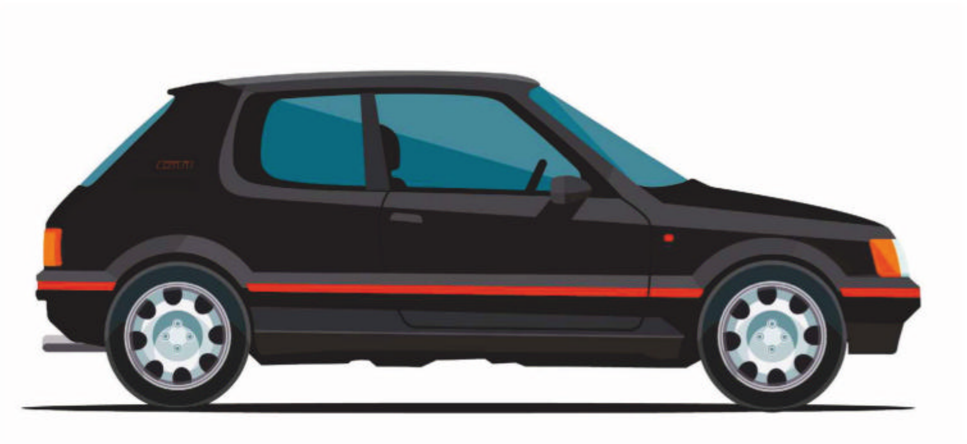
Step 4 – map it
Remap yourself happy before you end up falling down the rabbit hole of turbos, forged internals, and engine swaps. More power, more noise and bragging rights of the murky world of 'Stage 1' (or 2, or 3 or 4). No one knows what they signify anyway. Pop 'n' bang remaps didn't exist then. Thank God.

Step 5 – wing it
Immerse yourself in fibreglass and wider than wide arches. Big spoilers. The more intense the better. Rieger, Dimma, Combat 2 and PSG kits – but make sure it looks cartoonish. Then paint it fluoro snot green/ orange/gold. Kits *cannot* be functional or aerodynamic.

THE GREATEST OF ALL

Argue between yourselves, but these are the five hot hatches we love the most

WORDS OLLIE MARRIAGE **ILLUSTRATIONS** PETER GREENWOOD

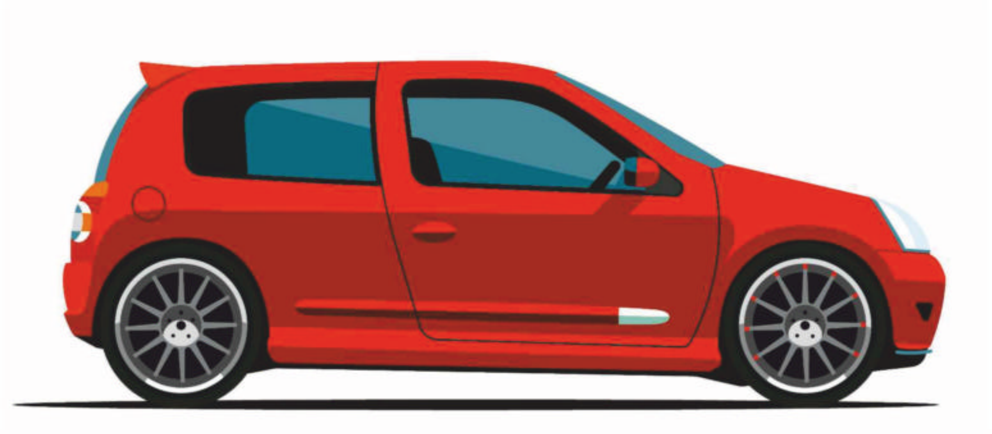


Peugeot 205 GTI

1984

#BUILT: 332,000 **PRICE NEW:** £8,445 **PRICE NOW:** £15,000

The car that, above all others, epitomises and defines the hot hatch. It wasn't the first, it wasn't the fastest, but back in the late 1980s, it was the greatest. Pretty, light, with a lusty 130bhp 1.9-litre engine (yep, we rate that over the 1.6), wonderfully engaging steering and a chassis which entered into legend, the 205 GTI remains perhaps the most iconic hot hatch of all – even today, some 40 years since it first appeared. Such a pretty car, and driving one today with its fabulously slim pillars, light cabin and tinny doors is a reminder of just how far safety has come. Just 860kg people, and not an airbag in sight.

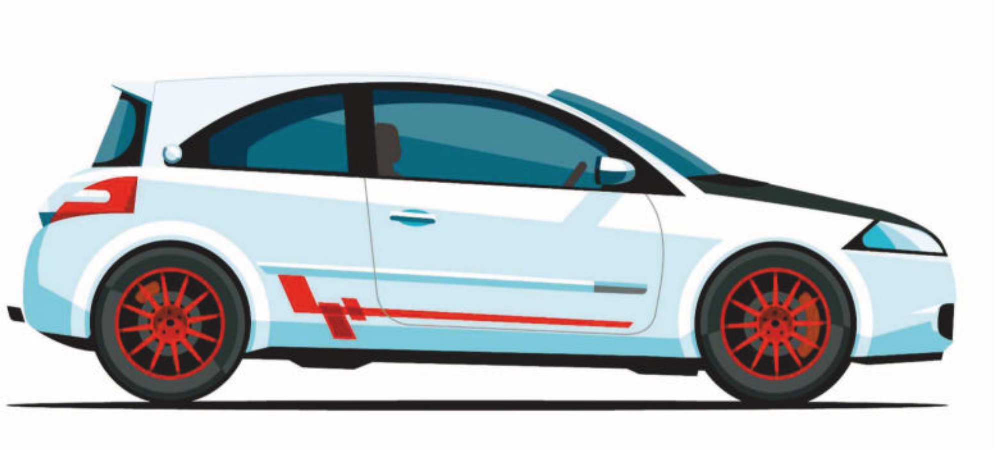


Renault Clio 182 Trophy

2005

#BUILT: 550 **PRICE NEW:** £15,500 **PRICE NOW:** £10,000

Ah, Renault. The carmaker most dedicated to the hot hatch – plus the most radical and innovative in its approach. Things kicked off in 1976 with the mid-engined homologation special that was the Turbo, and even today, not quite out of it thanks to the Alpine A290. That one needs some work, Jean. In between, legends have come and gone, and picking one... well, it's got to be the 2005 Clio 182 Trophy. The one with the remote reservoir Sachs dampers. The driving position was terrible, but it was dazzling in every other way.

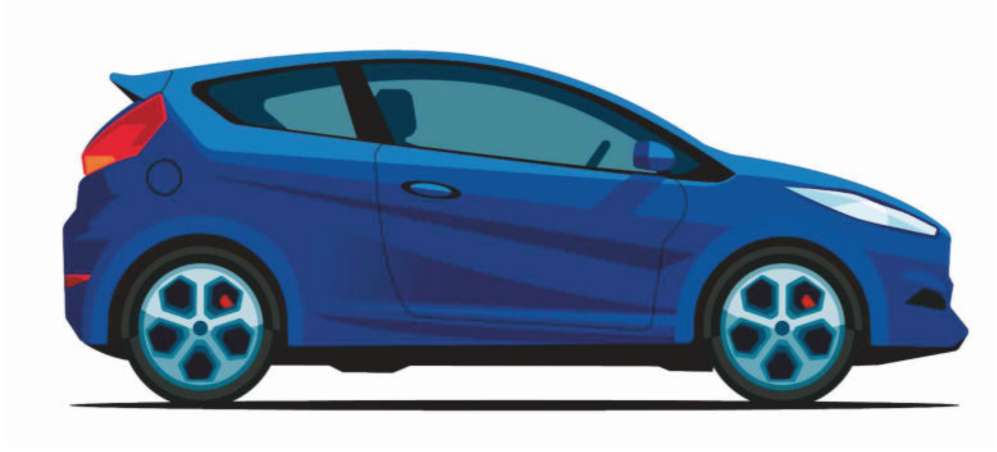


Renault Megane R26.R

2008

#BUILT: 450 **PRICE NEW:** £22,990 **PRICE NOW:** £28,000

Probably the most focused hot hatch ever. You'd have thought Renault couldn't come up with a new approach, not when it had seemingly cut the hot hatch every which way already. We'd had hot Twingo city cars, V6s in the boot with rear drive, tie ups with Williams – and then, in 2008, Renault appeared to take inspiration from Porsche's 911 GT3. The R26.R sported plastic rear windows, an Akrapovič exhaust, moulded race seats, harnesses, Toyo Proxes R888 track tyres. Only 450 were built. No hot hatch has ever been more of a track weapon than this.

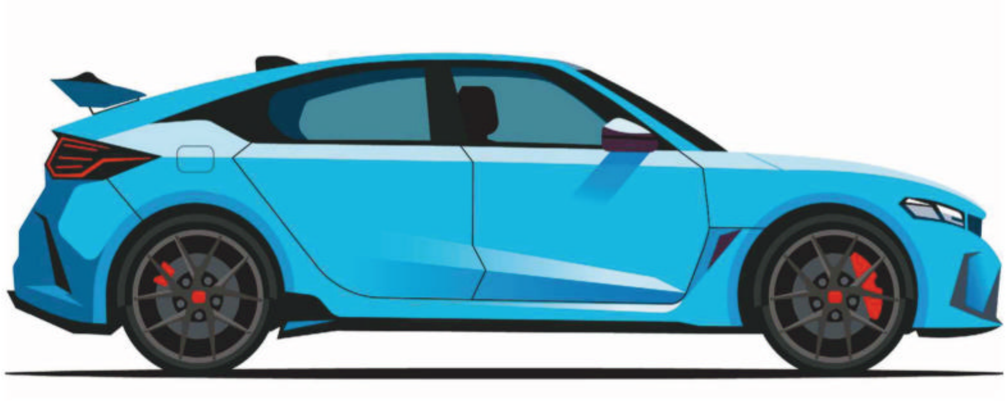


Ford Fiesta ST MkVII

2013

#BUILT: 26,000 **PRICE NEW:** £16,995 **PRICE NOW:** £5,000

Let's not be unkind here, but fast Fords have blown hot and cold over the years. Yes, the heady Cosworth days were great, but through much of the 1990s and 2000s Ford STs typically had fine chassis in search of fiery engines and attitude. Until the MkI Focus RS appeared. Boy, that rally inspired legend came close to usurping the 2013 Fiesta ST from this list. But the ST is sublime, a latter day 205 GTI with proper handling nous and a punchy turbo engine. The 2018 replacement didn't quite come alive in the same way. Go search one out.



Honda Civic Type R

2023

#BUILT: 20,000 to date **PRICE NEW:** £50,050 **PRICE NOW:** £38,000

No, not the EP3. That was the first evidence Honda could do a proper hot hatch, and it remains one to search out. But the current Type R, the one you're about to read more about, is perhaps the most complete hot hatch there has ever been. It no longer looks like a dog's dinner, it drives with such purpose, agility and communication, has a mighty engine and one of the finest gearboxes humanity has ever come with, is well packaged with a huge boot and beautifully made. Priced at £50k? A bargain.

Suzuki Swift Sport
2006

PRICE: £2,200

With just 123bhp on tap from its high revving, nat asp 1.6, the first Swift Sport was only really fast enough in a straight line for a 'warm hatch' title. And yet, lift off the throttle mid-corner and, with the rear of the car overtaking the front, you'd realise that it was a serious bit of mini hot hatchery. Sportier bumpers and spoilers, stiffer suspension, twin exhaust pipes, and red sport seats were a giveaway too. Plus, you can now get one for the price of a monthly energy bill.

Renault Megane RS 225 Cup '05

PRICE: £2,500

Obviously, what you really want is the hardcore Megane R26.R – the car that pretty much created the track day ready hot hatch genre – but they're £30,000 and Renault only made 450, so they're rare as hen's teeth. So, why not spend a little over £2k on a 225 Cup with essentially the same 2.0-litre turbo engine and just rip out the rear seats yourself? Could even wrap the bonnet in fake carbon if you really want to ape the famous full stop R.

Renault Sport Clio 182 2004

PRICE: £3,500

Again, the Trophy is the one you dream of, but if you're willing to take a gamble on high mileage then standard Clio 182s can be picked up for just a couple of thousand pounds these days. That really is a bargain. Weighing just over 1,100kg (or 20kg less with the Cup pack) and with a naturally aspirated 2.0-litre engine making 182bhp – hence the name – we'd buy one just to cock an inside rear wheel every now and again.

Ford Fiesta ST MkVII
2013

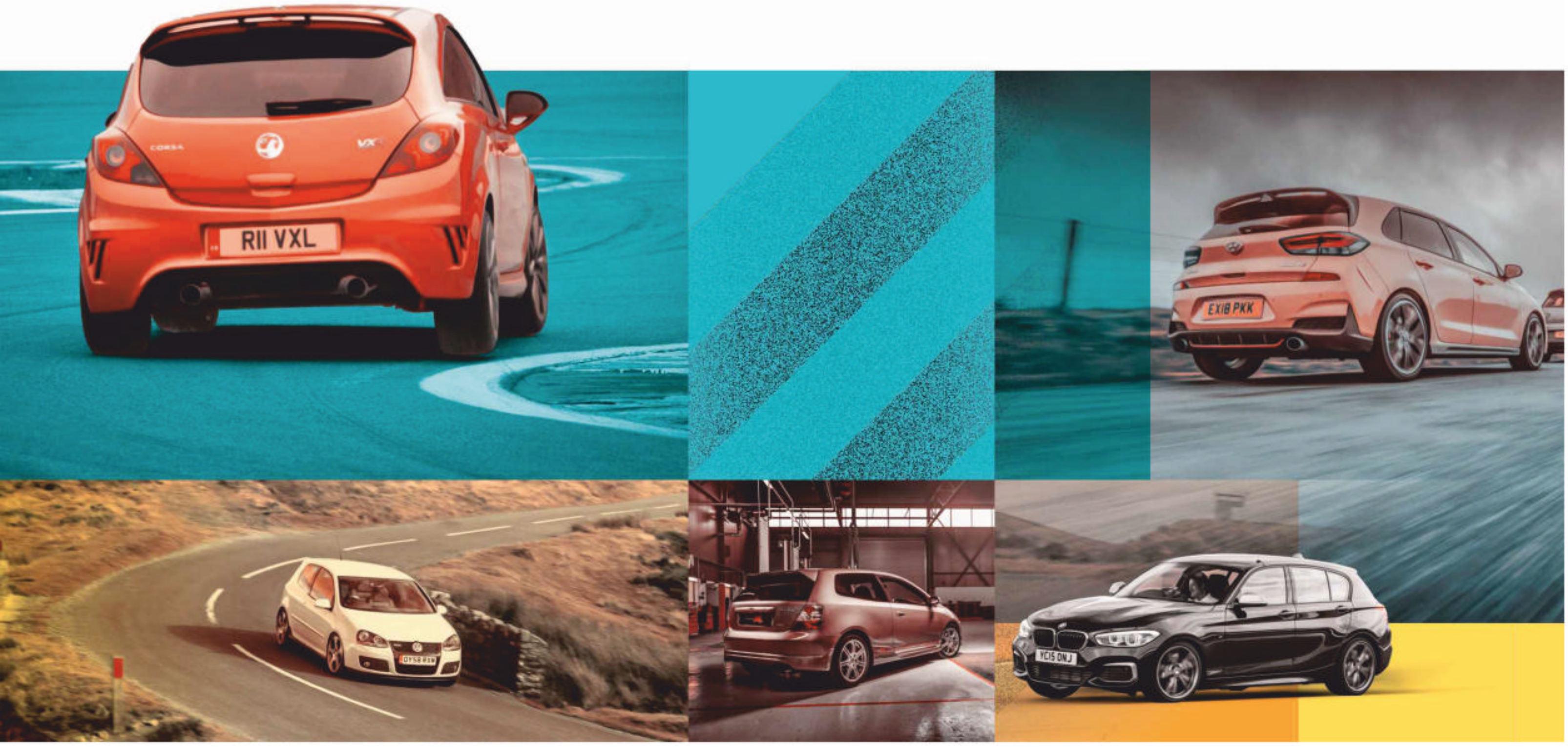
PRICE: £4,000

When Ford facelifted the sixth generation Fiesta (confusingly known as the MkVII in the UK) in 2013, it also introduced an all new, 1.6-litre Ecoboost engined ST and immediately blew its dinky hot hatch competition out of the water. Heck, the little Fiesta even beat the Ferrari 458 Speciale and McLaren P1 to be crowned *TopGear*'s Car of the Year in 2013. You can now pick up a low spec ST-1 for around four grand. Probably wouldn't even be able to get your P1 serviced for that.

Peugeot 106 GTi
1996

PRICE: £4,300

Want a dinky Peugeot hot hatch that doesn't come with the 'future classic' tax of the 205 GTi? The 106 GTi arrived with the standard car's facelift in 1996, and Peugeot managed to shove in a 120bhp 1.6-litre 16-valve engine, a 5spd manual and proper MacPherson strut front suspension. It only weighs around 75kg more than a 205 GTi too. Prices are creeping up for examples that weren't tastefully modified/ruined (delete as appropriate), so grab one quickly.



V'hall Corsa VXR N'ring
2011

PRICE: £4,500

To create this special edition, Vauxhall could have just stuck some Nürburgring stickers on to the standard Corsa VXR and charged a few grand more for its trouble. It didn't. In fact, it gave it an extra 13bhp and fitted Bilstein dampers, progressive rate springs, Brembo brakes, forged wheels and a limited slip diff between the front wheels. It's transformative, but the used car market doesn't seem to have caught on. Perhaps it's an image problem…

Volkswagen Golf GTI MkV
2004

PRICE: £5,000

After the success of the first couple, it took Volkswagen a while to really nail another Golf GTI. Thankfully, things all came together with the MkV. The 197bhp turbo four pot was a strong and willing engine, but it was the multi-link rear suspension that really transformed the car. Add to that the low seating position, manual or DSG gearboxes, tartan upholstery, a golf ball gearknob and those glorious telephone dial wheels. You can see why it's a future classic.

Honda Civic Type R EP3
2001

PRICE: £7,000

The EP3 was the second Civic Type R but the first to be sold on our shores. Built in, erm, Swindon, the hot Civic's centrepiece was its screaming 2.0-litre VTEC four pot. Ride and handling may not have been its strongest traits, but the 197bhp peak power output arrived at 7,400rpm and the gearlever was mounted on the dash, so you felt like a proper touring car driver. They're available for less cash, but at this price you might even get an unmodified example.

BMW M140i
2016

PRICE: £12,000

Looking for a hot hatch that doesn't follow the traditional recipe? It'd be hard to ignore the M140i with its turbocharged 3.0-litre straight six sending a hefty 355bhp to the rear wheels through a standard six-speed manual gearbox. It might not be the greatest manual shift ever and and the M140i isn't as tenacious as diff happy FWD hot hatches, but could you really pass up six cylinders? Just make sure it's dodged the affections of the pop 'n' bang remap massif.

Hyundai i30N
2017

PRICE: £16,000

While £16,000 is certainly a big chunk of cash, it still seems a reasonable deal for an early i30N Performance with less than 50,000 miles on the clock. Hyundai smashed it out of the park with the launch of its N division, having tempted former BMW M boss Albert Biermann to lead the team. A 2.0-litre turbo four pot drove the front wheels with 271bhp, while the £3k Performance pack added a limited slip diff, sticky tyres, bigger brakes and a rorty sports exhaust.

USED AND ABUSED

The 10 used hot hatch bargains you need to buy before we do

WORDS GREG POTTS

HOW TO DRIVE A HOT HATCH PROPERLY

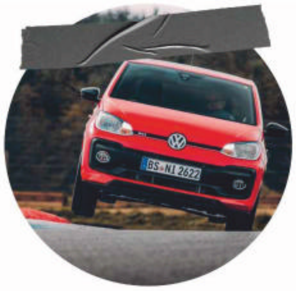
Marriage Guidance

WORDS OLLIE MARRIAGE

Hot hatches are regularly underestimated as proper drivers' cars. Don't make that mistake. A good hot hatch is as captivating to drive as any sports car – and capable of giant slaying feats because it suits our roads so well. Here's how to get the best out of one.

1. THE FRONT WHEELS

The front wheels have a lot to do. There might be more purity to the uncorrupted steering of a rear drive car, but there's so much fun to be had with the tussle and scrub of a car that's trying to do everything with the front wheels. Be smooth, don't overwork the tyres – they've got a lot on their plate.



2. BRAKES

Trail braking a hot hatch is a skill for all seasons. Don't just brake in a straight line, carry the braking to the apex, just blending it off as you slow. That way you keep grip on the front wheels and get the rear axle involved.

3. LIFT OFF OVERSTEER

Hopefully not too involved. Overdo the braking and turning and you risk the back end stepping out of line. Chicken out once you're back on the power mid corner and this is called lift off oversteer. Don't fear it too much. Modern ESP Sport modes have effectively dealt with this. Good systems intervene smoothly.

4. TURBO LAG

Most modern hatches have turbos and automatic gearboxes. Learn to left foot brake and you can nullify turbo lag by getting on the throttle while releasing the brakes. Just be careful you don't upset the ESP system – some cars really don't like it when you use two pedals at once.

5. THE HANDBRAKE

We can count on the fingers of one, erm, finger, how many hot hatches on sale today have a manual handbrake. It's the Toyota GR Yaris. It might just be the greatest exponent of the handbrake turn there has ever been. A good handbrake should lock the back wheels instantly, yet also give some measure of control if you're in a snowy car park.

TYPE R
八丁堀駅前
Hatchobori Sta.

HOTA to HATCHŌ

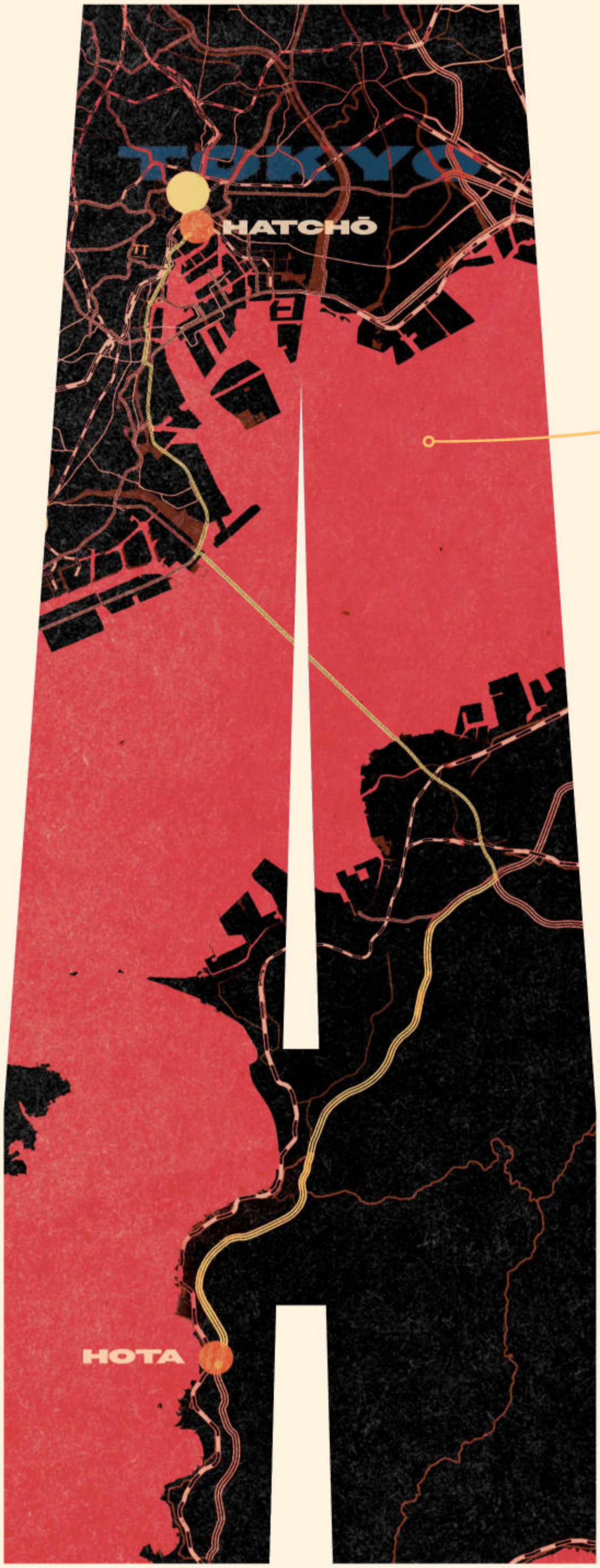
ほた

ROUTE ONE

八丁

All you need for a roadtrip is a car, a destination and an excuse. Over to our man in Japan to stretch that brief to its limit...

WORDS OLLIE KEW **PHOTOGRAPHY** TOBY THYER



No, it ain't our most epic roadtrip ever. Hatcho to Hota is a mere hour and a half (without photography) of mainly motorway, but somehow in Japan, triple carriageway cruising isn't as boring as the UK's road to hell...

A long time ago, a friend told me there's a place nestled on the eastern side of Tokyo bay called Hota. "Surely," they smirked, "somewhere in Japan there's a Hatcha. Then all you'd need is a Japanese hot hatch, and you'd have a quintessential *TopGear* mag story." A peek backstage for you there. Alfa Stelvio over Italy's Stelvio Pass? Storm chasing in a Huracán? Where *do* we get our ideas?

Of course, we don't just lob darts at a map and set off on an arbitrary quest for a tortured pun and, oh, would you look at that, a quick delve suggests there's a Hatchobori district in southern Tokyo. Close enough.

I didn't fly halfway across the world just for this. Honda invited *TG* to its headquarters to check on its EV progress. Much earnest bowing and four billion PowerPoint slides later, I've been introduced to slimmer batteries, ultra efficient motor windings and low wattage heaters. But no actual cars. Or pictures of cars, or even disguised renderings of cars, at night, in a dark room.

With a day to kill in Tokyo before a night flight homeward and an aching brain, I'm hungry for something tangible, not numbers, graphs and promises. This is the chance. Just need a Japanese hot hatch. Lucky my host makes a doozy and they buy my pleas to borrow one for an epic roadtrip of derring do hook, line and sinker.

Early doors, I'm in an underground car park beneath a Honda office block across the road from Akasaka Palace. There's a small problem: the Japanese market Civic Type R – identical to one you'd buy in Britain in every way – refuses to speak English. There's no option to set any of its readouts into a language I can remotely understand.

Luckily I have an inside man, photographer Toby. Toby lives here, speaks Japanese and is pretty handy at reading it too. Which is how he told me there's no option to change the language in the touchscreen. Still, shouldn't be too much of a problem. My phone knows where we're going. And the Civic's reassuringly familiar, cradling us in its absurdly well padded red chairs. They even have the decency to drive on the correct side of the road. Handy for a *gaijin* – an outsider, a foreigner.

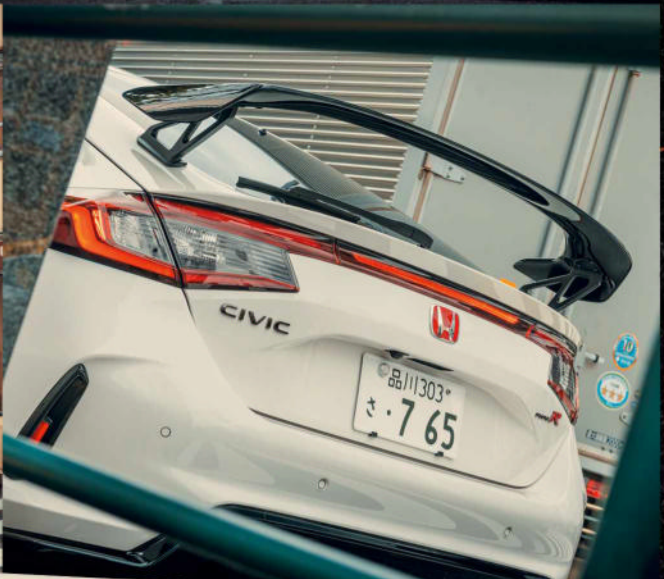
Yep, I learned that word from *Tokyo Drift* too, which alongside the *Midnight Club* PlayStation franchise was my teenage introduction to this megacity. Japan might be gripped with anxieties about its ageing population and a stale job market, but when you're dangled and dropped into the metropolis like the little Google Street View figure, there are few signs this place is on the wane from its 1980s tech boom peak.

This bull won't give you wings but the Type R already has a giant one

GIRLS
品川303
さ・7 65

レインボーブリッジ
Rainbow Bridge
Haneda
CA
東京湾 アクアライン
TOKYO WAN AQUA-LINE EXP
湾岸線
Bayshore-route
1
横浜
Yokohama
11
B
C1
3
4
芝公園
Shibakoen
浜崎橋JCT700m
E1
東名
TOMEI EXP

Everywhere in Tokyo looks like an architect's impression of a new skyscraper

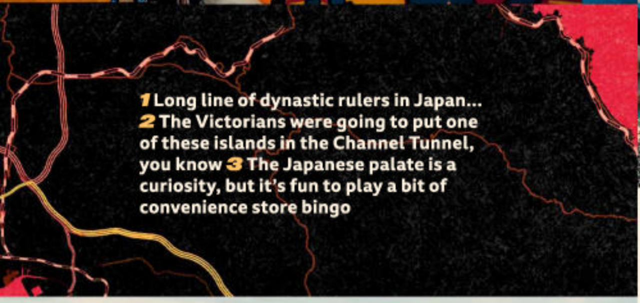

CIVIC
品川303
さ・7 65

八丁堀駅前
Hatchobori Sta.

If you recognise this, put down the controller and go out for a nice walk

八丁堀駅
Hatchobori Sta.
Times
BIG

2



1 Long line of dynastic rulers in Japan... **2** The Victorians were going to put one of these islands in the Channel Tunnel, you know **3** The Japanese palate is a curiosity, but it's fun to play a bit of convenience store bingo

Tokyo swallows 5,000 square miles (London carpets a mere 600). Its economy is worth more than the whole of Italy's. And Brazil's. And Korea's, for the time being. The Japanese aren't happy – they've recently slipped back to fourth in the global rich list behind Germany and their political scene is just as fractured as ours, led by an unpopular coalition scandalised by corruption. But to walk through? To drive around? 'Downtown' Tokyo still feels like you've been ejected from a hyperloop 30 years into the future. To a *gaijin* at least.

In recent years there's also been a narrative that Tokyo is fed up of its 'polite to a fault' reputation, particularly towards brash, insensitive tourists. Since *that* Logan Paul video, there's been a growing backlash of what's become termed *kankō kogai*. Tourist pollution. That if Japan continues to welcome with open arms outsiders who don't care for or adhere to its bowing deference, then it risks eroding what it even means to be Japanese in the first place.

TRG
RUNVIC
400 m
toward Kawasaki Kisarazu
Filling Cake
¥486

“TOKYO FEELS LIKE YOU’VE BEEN EJECTED FROM A HYPERLOOP 30 YEARS INTO THE FUTURE”

3

Not much sign of any ire today. Driving through rush hour Tokyo is easier than London on Christmas Day. There’s none of that sense the city is out to get you, to prise open your wallet and help itself in return for a minor, victimless infraction. Put your indicator on and you *will* be given way to. Even in a winged, red badged road racer, you’re waved out into traffic, beckoned from T-junctions, and should you need to pause amid a six lane junction to grab a quick photo, anyone behind waits patiently, easing past only when they’re quite sure it will inconvenience precisely no one else. To the ‘out of my way’ European mind which presumes a base level of lowest common denominator idiocy from our fellow motorists, it’s even more of a culture shock than the food, the cleanliness and the platypus nosed trains.

Hota is an hour away, but Hatchōbori is only a mile or two east, so we resolve to loop east past the Imperial Palace to visit the latter first, then head out of the bay. To be honest, Hatchōbori was just another anonymous avenue of high rise apartments and convenience shops. Given all we’re looking for is a street sign, it doesn’t take long to bag that and get on with what I’m really after – a day on Japanese roads. You might like to get to know a place through its food or music. I like to drive through it.

Our route out to Hota takes us south from Shibuya (home of the most famous zebra crossing this side of Abbey Road), island hopping the reclaimed land that supports Haneda airport and along earthquakeproof expressways I recognise from all those hours of PlayStation research. Dropping out of Kawasaki, we’re funnelled into the Aqua-Line – the £7bn tunnel carrying the motorway under Tokyo bay. One of the last megaprojects paid for by Japan’s booming techonomic bubble, it opened in 1997 and within two years, tuners were taking advantage of the dead straight, crosswind proof runways to stretch the legs of tuned RX-7s, Supras and Skylines beyond 200mph.

1

TopGear

2

3

MICHELIN
brembo

4

保田駅
HOTA STATION
AUTO KIOSK
TYPE R
· 765

ようこそ千葉県へ
Welcome to Chiba

5

TYPE R
CIVIC R-00008

“THE CIVIC IS JUST AS MAGIC HERE AS IT WAS IN THE MOUNTAINS OF SNOWDONIA”

1 Face it, Japan even does motorway vending machines better than Britain **2** Not all trains here go like bullets **3** Ollie can now say ‘Route is being recalculated’ in flawless Japanese **4** Imagine parking at a train station without needing to remortgage **5** Chassis no8? Will this be in a museum one day?

We’re not troubling the limits. This Type R is now such a well rounded bit of kit. The last couple were spectacular road going touring cars but restlessly strained against your better judgement. The latest one is supple and forgiving when it takes the hint you’re in the mood for a Honda, not a Type R. Easier on the eye too. No one here pays it any attention. That would be impolite.

Toby’s midway through an anecdote explaining how Tokyo’s road manners aren’t as utopian as I think (he was once interviewed under caution at a police station for glancing a taxi’s mirror while riding his scooter through traffic) when the Aqua-Line bursts out of the waters of Tokyo bay, morphing from undersea tunnel to spindly bridge in one seamless motion. This is what’s mesmerising about Japan – the infrastructure is a landmark in itself. We have Ben the clock. Paris has that radio tower and New York’s full of offices. In Japan, you marvel at its viaducts, railway platforms and motorway sliproads modelled on rejected plans for a rollercoaster. Why is none of it rusty or weathered? Why is there no graffiti or neglect?

Halfway along the Aqua-Line, we make landfall on the Umihotaru Parking Area – an underwhelming name for the only service station in the middle of the sea. It’s a multistorey car park, a shopping mall and a food court all rolled into one and decked out like a cruise ship, complete with ropes, rigging and portholes, perched on yet another artificial island. We park next to a stunning Nismo-kitted R34 Skyline, grab snacks, take in the views of the megacity we’ve left behind and get back on the road.

Usually on these trips, there’s some sort of time limit we’re up against. A flight or a hire car return. Not today, which is bliss. I considered billing it a race against Japan’s formidable public transport arsenal, but the bullet train doesn’t run this way. A local stopper train that looks like a piece of space junk on a trolley jack winds its way up from Hota to Hatcho in a couple of hours, but the car takes half that so I’ll spare you the false jeopardy. Back on land, the road now twists alongside the railway, through short tunnels with coppery rock-faced cuttings.

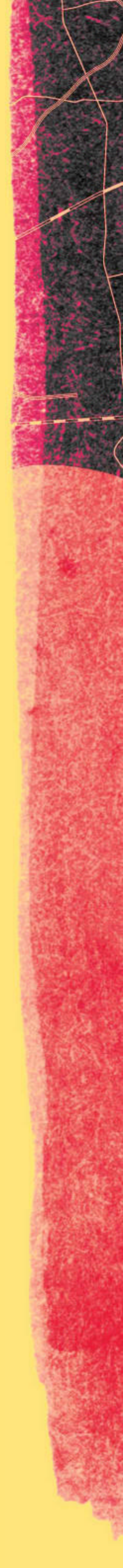
The Type R comes alive here. Certain cars only work in the context of the environment they were born in – lots of American iron, for instance. Supermini hot hatches were forged on the back roads of Europe, which is why they never caught on much in, say, rural Australia. The Civic is just as magic here, in its backyard, as it was in the mountains of Snowdonia or the pine forests of Sweden when it won our 2023 Performance Car of the Year title. It was great in town, and sublime on the motorway.

You can’t flummox it. The obedience of that front end, the engine’s tenacity, the sense there’s always more support available from the suspension should you require it. We weren’t sure we’d get another Type R – not now the standard Civic is hybrid, auto only, there are CO_2 tripwires to vault and Honda is throwing billions at an ambitious EV onslaught. But in what might be the last days of the classic petrol, turbo, manual hot hatch, Honda’s defined what might be the greatest of all time. If you really adore and worship *driving*, incredibly, it’s actually worth the money asked. “Fifty grand for a Honda” sneer the badge snobs. Fifty grand for one of the best cars ever made is a steal.

Sorry if I’m gushing. Felt I had to tell someone, because the Type R doesn’t get much home support. Where are the cheerleaders? Drive a Ferrari in Italy you’re second only to the pope in road hierarchy. Stop to gas up your Dodge Challenger in rural California and the attendant will enthusiastically ask you to pop the hood and enquire how much supercharger boost pressure you’re running. Even ever cynical Britain still reserves a “Nice car, mate” for an Aston or Bentley if it’s specced tastefully. But the day walking Japanese don’t seem overly bothered by this emperor among family hatches.

No one seems interested in much at all in Hota. The conveniently named station I’ve marked as finish line is charming, built over 100 years ago, but the whitewash is flaking in the tropical sun and the ticket desk is unmanned. One train an hour rumbles along the immaculate weed free tracks. A solitary passenger disembarks as it pauses. momentarily glances at two lost tourists and their triple piped hire car, and ambles away, hoping *kankō kogai* hasn’t found her sleepy backwater. She disappears down streets with shuttered shops where the only cheery faces are on the kei cars peeking out of pocket sized driveways.

And now we only have to turn around and go back. Around the bay this time, along deserted motorways (the Aqua-Line is half the distance, so hardly anyone takes the long way round anymore). Back from Hota, to Hatcho, in the best one ever. Any excuse.



DIARY OF A CES

LVCC COFFEE
CRAIG

WORDS
GREG POTTS

PHOTOGRAPHY
MANUEL PORTUGAL

The death knell has sounded for the traditional motor show, and carmakers are turning to the world's biggest tech show for launches. We take on the biggest of them all

CES
DEER
15
onate Intelligence
CES
Central Hall
Audio | Video
CAR
ITALIA
ITALIA • CES
LVCC CENTRAL STATION
SLOTS
A
FUN

DAY 1

5:00am

Remember when Mark Wahlberg revealed his daily regimen on social media and the world collectively lost its mind at the fact an adult man woke up to start the day at 2:30am? Well, this isn't going to be one of those situations. I'm out at the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas to see Honda unveil its new 0 Series EVs, and to find out why so many carmakers are attending the world's largest electronics exhibition and trade show. And no, the 5:00am start isn't due to serious commitment to the graft. Blame the jet lag. I do manage to squeeze in a trip to the hotel gym, but it's so full of fellow CES attendees that I can only manage 30 minutes on a bike before a queue starts to form and I come over all British and polite. Mark wouldn't approve.

10:00am

It's day one of CES 2025 and I've been promised by veteran attendees that media have access to the show's main home at the Las Vegas Convention Centre (LVCC) before the general public. As it's my first time at CES and my first time in Vegas, I'm hoping to have a scout around the different halls to pick out some brands that I might want to accost for interviews over the next couple of days. Unfortunately, it seems as though there has been a breakdown in communication this year, because after being passed around multiple different security checkpoints in search of an elusive green wristband that will apparently grant me access, I finally learn that in 2025 the rules have changed to only allow broadcast media into the halls on the initial media day. Good start.

11:00am

Luckily, there is a whole programme of press conferences scheduled to take place throughout the day. Unluckily, it's all being held at a different convention centre at the Mandalay Bay hotel on the other side of town. I shun the official CES shuttle buses and decide to take public transport in the hope that it will be quicker and more efficient. It also means I get to ride the Las Vegas monorail, and everyone should take a monorail when it's an option. We all know how well it went in Springfield. Somehow it takes over an hour to get door to door, with the monorail dropping passengers off inside the MGM Grand casino with no signs pointing to the exit. That's how they get you. Taking great care to avoid the slot machine zombies, I finally escape and manage to find a free tram from the medieval castle themed Excalibur hotel to the convention centre at Mandalay Bay. Although even after that I have to walk through yet another casino, past a giant shark tank (seriously) and what seems like 18 branches of Starbucks. Could be a long day.

12:30pm

Things start to look up with the discovery of a free packed lunch for members of the media covering the day's events. I realise I haven't actually done any work yet, but I'm not one to turn down a free meal.

1:00pm

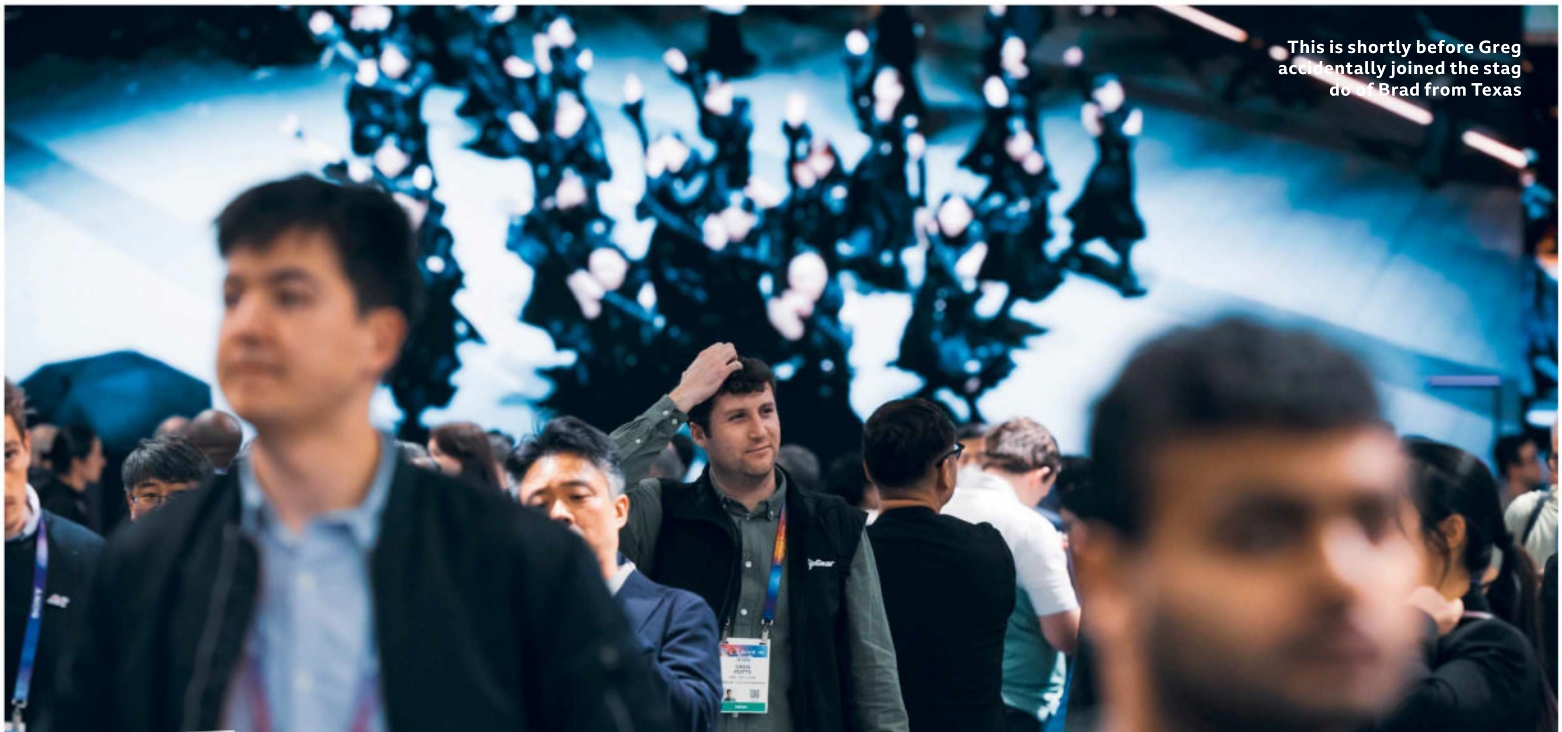
Toyota is the first big player in the car world to host a press conference, so I take my seat near the front to see what chairman Akio Toyoda will reveal. Will it be a reborn MR2? Perhaps at least an update on one of the 30 EVs that it intends to have on sale globally by 2030. Erm, nope. Unfortunately, it seems Toyoda has somewhere else to be, because he jumps on stage with his usual enthusiasm, cracks a few jokes at his own expense, gives us a small update on Toyota's interesting but not really car related Woven City project and then heads off in time to catch a matinee magic show.

3:00pm

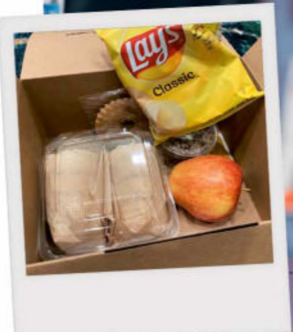
Despite not being on the original agenda, it seems as though Chinese brand Zeekr has managed to blag a spot for a press conference as it prepares to show off a range of its EVs that aren't available in the US (despite the fact it has just set up an office in Phoenix, Arizona). It's immediately obvious that it should have splashed out on one of the bigger conference rooms. There's plenty of clamour to hear what European boss Giovanni Lanfranchi and global VP Dr Zhu Ling have to say. It's mostly about self driving, fancy new processing chips and AI computing power, which it turns out will be a theme for carmakers across the show this year. Probably should have guessed. Give us bhp numbers, 0–62mph times and efficiency figures!

5:00pm

It's back to the LVCC (which apparently is now open in parts) for the Sony press conference, because the rumour is that there'll be an update on the Sony x Honda electric saloon car project. It doesn't disappoint, although only after some discussion about how Sony helps the NFL to stream altcasts of live American football games where everyone playing is transformed into characters from *Toy Story* or *The Simpsons*. Anyway, Sony Honda Mobility boss Yasuhide Mizuno eventually enters the stage with the newly christened Afeela 1 and announces that it'll be on sale in California as soon as his speech ends, prices starting at $89,900 in case you're interested. That's the cue for every motoring journalist in the audience to start writing the accompanying news story for their respective websites, while Sony wows some fellow nerds with announcements about new anime films.



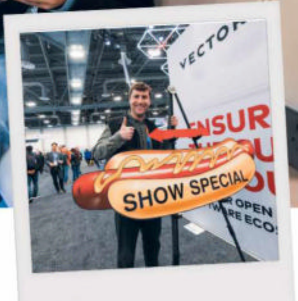
This is shortly before Greg accidentally joined the stag do of Brad from Texas

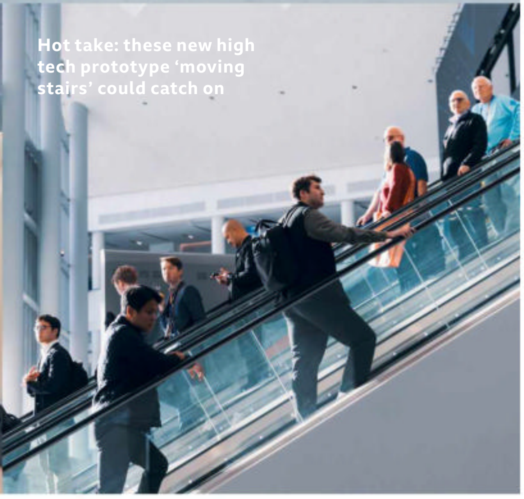

Lay's
Classic

audible
KARAOKE
TikTok
zoom
...and Counting
Sony

CES | ZEEKR
The Dawn of Future

He tried to beat it, but when jet lag comes calling, a man's got to sleep


VECTOR
SHOW SPECIAL



Hot take: these new high tech prototype 'moving stairs' could catch on

↳ 6:30pm

It's probably worth pointing out here that the LVCC is absolutely massive. It's a 430,000m^2 facility with 230,000m^2 of exhibition space. That means it's over twice the size of the relatively new international airport terminal that's just down the road. As a result, most of the walk back to the hotel takes place inside said convention centre. In fact, you spend so much time being blasted by air conditioning they're actually handing out CES branded lip balms.

↳ 7:00pm

I eventually arrive at a briefing with Honda's European PR team. The big 0 Series press conference is at the LVCC the next morning, but we're granted a little sneak preview and handed a press release and pictures ahead of time so that my news story can go out as soon as the covers are whipped off the two cars.

↳ 8:00pm

Time for dinner with the Honda team. Vegas probably isn't the place for those with decision paralysis – there are over 50 bars and restaurants in our hotel complex alone – but we head for an Asian fusion place. Perhaps we'll get the inside scoop on a new NSX after a couple of glasses of sake.

↳ DAY 2 4:30am

Even worse sleep. And opening up the laptop to find that it's lunch time at home was a bad move. The emails begin to flood in. Fortunately, I've got some planning to get on with ahead of the day. I've fired off some messages to try and meet with some of the manufacturers exhibiting at CES, although with over 6,000 members of the media about and 141,000 attendees in total, it has proven tricky to nail down times for a chat. Luckily, I've got a secret weapon – a *TopGear* branded gilet that's full tech bro chic. I'm confident it'll open doors.

↳ 8:30am

First out of the blocks today is BMW with its press conference to unveil a swanky new Panoramic iDrive infotainment system. I spend most of the time wincing at the painful autocue banter as comedian and host Tim Meadows chats to a few German engineers and butchers the name of the new setup. Horribly uncomfortable primary school spec benches are provided for seating too – hope they don't preview the chairs in the upcoming Neue Klasse cars.

BETTER GET YOU SOME
PAPA JOHNS

The World's First
Isolation Electric Toothbrush

↳ 10:30am

It's finally time for the biggest announcement of the show at the Honda press conference. Well, it's the biggest announcement as far as *TopGear* is concerned. There could have been a groundbreaking revolution in TV tech or an update on Elon Musk's ridiculous brain implant chip and we probably wouldn't have noticed. Anyway, the world eventually gets to see the new 0 Saloon and 0 SUV prototypes for the first time. Honda reckons they're both 95 per cent production ready, with the SUV going on sale in the US in the first half of 2026 and the saloon shortly after. Hopefully both will have proper names by then. Oh, and on the subject of names, we're very pleased to see Asimo making a return as Honda's new AI enabled operating system.

↳ 11:00am

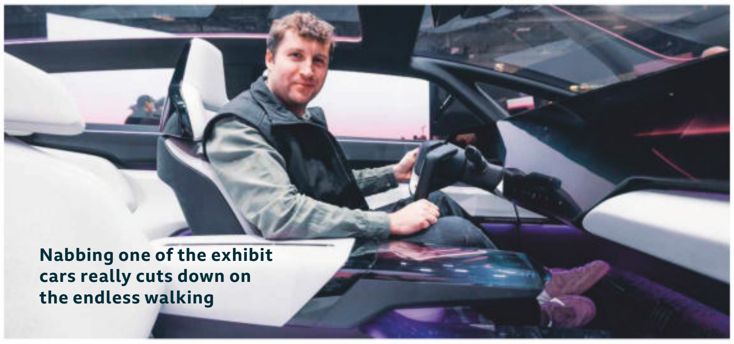
Scout Motors is making its first CES appearance this year, so I meet with Ryan Decker, head of strategy, and Chris Benjamin, chief design officer. The company is aiming to operate like a startup as it revives the spirit of the International Harvester Scout from the 1960s and 1970s, but it's actually a new brand launched by the Volkswagen Group so will one day function like Porsche, Audi, Skoda etc. Plus, VW recently announced that it'll invest $5.8bn into US EV off-roady brand Rivian, so Scout Motors will have access to its fancy software tech as it prepares to launch the Traveler SUV and Terra Truck in 2027. Realistic timescales for the launch of new cars from newly formed companies? It'll never catch on.

↳ 1:00pm

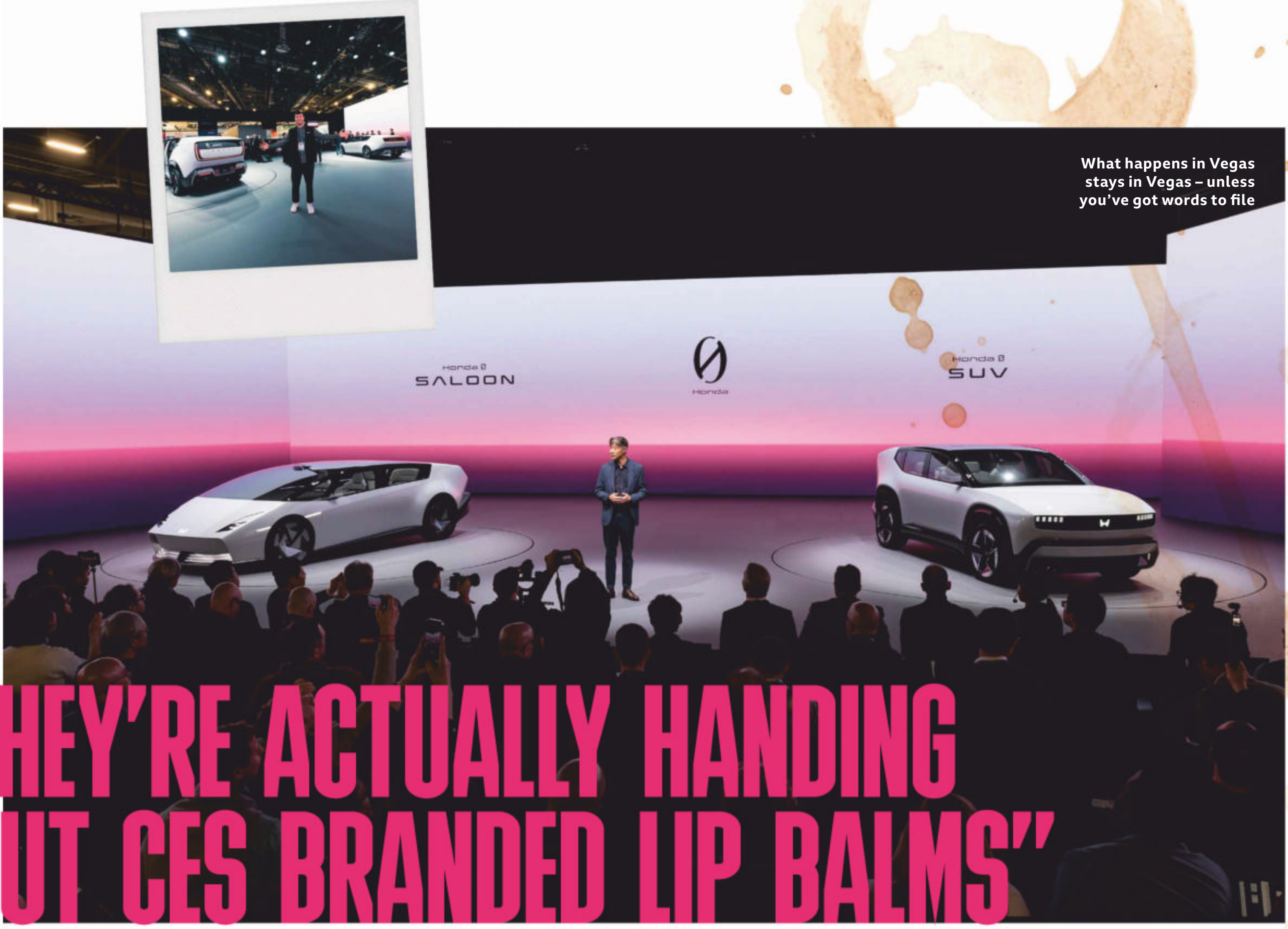
Back to the Honda stand, which is in the LVCC's West Hall – thankfully most of the carmakers are grouped together in the same place this year. I'm assured that hasn't always been the case. Anyway, I'm here to get behind the ropes and poke around the 0 Saloon and 0 SUV prototypes. What's immediately obvious is the doorhandles don't work and are instead controlled by a generic remote that may well have been pinched from a hotel room. That's often the way with motor show models of course. No change there. Otherwise, the two cars feel pretty well screwed together and with large glass roofs the interiors are full of light. Not many physical buttons, though.

↳ 3:00pm

I run off to take some pictures of the monster LG, Samsung and Panasonic



Nabbing one of the exhibit cars really cuts down on the endless walking



What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas – unless you've got words to file

'THEY'RE ACTUALLY HANDING OUT CES BRANDED LIP BALMS'

displays in the Central Hall, not quite realising that it'll be a 20-minute walk each way to get there. Rather than get a jog on when I'm running late for an interview with key Honda execs on the way back, I opt for a gamble on the free LVCC Loop with a whole fleet of Teslas in varying states of repair running in the underground tunnels dug by The Boring Company. There are currently three separate stations within the LVCC itself. It's a quite ridiculous solution to the problem, but luckily there are no traffic jams and it gets me to the interview just in time.

↳ 3:31pm

Well, I'm perhaps a minute late, but luckily the translation equipment is still being set up so it goes unnoticed. After asking the obvious question – "When are we getting a 0 Saloon Type R?" and getting an answer that sounds like they'd like to build a fast Saloon with fake gearshifts – I also quiz the Honda bigwigs on why the company chose to launch its new era of EVs at a tech show. "A recent environmental change means that CES is more software development focused," says Noriya Kaihara, who has the extremely important sounding title of 'director, executive vice president and representative executive officer'. "The 0 Series cars will be software defined vehicles, so it's very appropriate for us to introduce them at CES. A lot of big OEMs are also now launching new models here, so that is the reason why." Safety in numbers, it seems.

↳ 4:30pm

Back to the LVCC once again to pick up a few more interviews. The gilet works its magic, and I manage to grab a few minutes with Aptera founder Steve Fambro. Not heard of Aptera? For those in sunnier climes, listen up. The company has built a swoopy, lightweight solar powered car that's almost ready for production and claims 400 miles of range on a single charge. You can plug it into a fast charger like any normal EV, or park it outside in California and you'll get up to 40 miles per day of free sun fuelled range going back into the battery. Not sure whether it'll be quite as effective in Glasgow.

↳ 5:00pm

While I'm here I pop my head into the South Hall, which it turns out is overflowing with everything from racing sim setups and chess playing robots to water bottle-mounted fans and "the world's first 60° oscillation electric toothbrush". Us neither. I haven't even scratched the surface of what's on display. The Venetian (yep, the hotel with the gondolas) also has its own convention centre and is apparently the home for all health and food based tech at CES. Perhaps I'll save that for next year.

↳ 6:00pm

There's probably another AI-infused robot vacuum cleaner being launched somewhere, but I've hit 30,000 steps and feel as though I've got a good sense of why tech obsessed carmakers want to come here to launch products that are chock full of computing power and could soon drive themselves. Time for home, although did someone say that Janet Jackson had a residency at the hotel? Perhaps one more night out here won't hurt.

DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH

The Octa is the biggest, baddest version of the Defender yet – conquering the South African wilderness should be a walk in the park…

WORDS JASON BARLOW

It sounds sacrilegious, but some of us reckon the

Sterrato might be the best Lamborghini ever.

Super slidy, looks great, can take lots of punishment. Likewise the Porsche 911 Dakar. Sure, the limit is much lower than in racier 911s, but life's easier when you get there. It's an interesting direction of travel.

The Land Rover Defender Octa is on a similar trajectory but arrives from the opposite end of the spectrum. The mission statement here is to create the world's fastest off roader. Trying to define that is like nailing jelly to a wall, and a Nürburgring lap time isn't going to tell the whole story. It's about bandwidth, creating something that can do preposterous things off road while also behaving in normal conditions.

So Octa is the answer to a disparate bunch of formerly rather niche questions. A dune bashing, quasi Dakar rally raider disguised as a long distance family hauler. A rock crawler that can also drift with mindless abandon. Celebratory, too. With the Land Rover name now parked in the basement as the company bigs up individual model brands, Defender has been an enormo-hit since it arrived in 2019. Its much loved but antiquated predecessor was shifting 12,000 units per year at the end, the current model is doing those numbers every month. The business case initially assumed 55,000 annual global sales, so double that plus all those highly specced Range Rovers equals heady profit.

Now here's the flagship. The Octa has been three years in the making, is extensively reengineered (13,960 additional tests were carried out), and lands costing £161k. Sheesh. Is it worth it? We're in South Africa to find out, and the full gamut of challenges await. So much so that it's quite possible we could kill this new car.

About the name: Octa takes its inspiration from the diamond, octahedral in shape, equal parts beautiful and tough. It's also something LR could register in 175 territories without fear of legal entanglements. Maybe SV just wasn't distinctive enough.

Looks good, huh. Age and familiarity haven't withered the Defender's design, though the controversial "square of despair" is still there. In Octa guise, it rides 28mm higher than the regular car and is 68mm wider overall, with muscular wheelarch extensions. The design team has resisted the temptation to fully "murder out" the Defender, to the point that it's about as subtle as a huge high performance SUV could ever be. The First Edition cars are painted a new colour, Faroe Green, and there are fresh copper and grey shades. It's rather military in look and feel, all the more so if the optional matte protective film is present. The only frippery is the chopped carbon fibre on the bonnet, flanks and seats.

Most of the changes enhance the Defender's already formidable fitness for purpose. The front and rear axles have been moved forwards (by 4mm and 3mm) to fit the bigger tyres and manage the extra ride height. There's a larger intake at the front to cope with the new engine's hungrier cooling requirements, and a powder coated metal undershield for extra protection. The rear gets something similar. An extended bar behind the shield provides cover for a pair of auxiliary radiators, and there's an undertray made of a tough composite. Thermal management was key. There's also a heat shield around the fuel tank and triple insulated fuel lines. In fact, there's about 12 miles of piping on this thing. Wheel articulation in its most extreme setting is up 100mm to 500mm, and its approach, departure and breakover angles are all improved.

Few cars sit as solidly on the road as this, or make for a more intimidating convoy. Lesser traffic quivers in our wake. Exiting Cape Town and heading towards the Cederberg mountains brings an immediate surprise, though. Where the old supercharged 5.0-litre V8 was a bit of a party animal – like John Belushi in *Animal House* – the new and more emissions friendly 4.4-litre twin turbo with mild hybrid feels surprisingly restrained. There's 626bhp and 553lb ft available here but it's not all up in your face. It's a BMW unit but receives a number of model specific modifications, including a reinforced cradle for the transmission and a new oil sump. There are unique propshafts, larger diameter driveshafts and reinforced joints. The engineers have even introduced high tensile steel in the rear differential because the Octa generates a substantially higher amount of axle torque. The ZF eight speed box is familiar, mated to a selectable high and low transfer case.

"THE DESIGN TEAM'S RESISTED THE URGE TO FULLY 'MURDER OUT' THE DEFENDER"

It's in the V8 job description that it must emit a sound like rolling thunder under load. So the Octa has a bespoke quad pipe exhaust system whose back pressure has been finessed to optimise performance without hurting its ability to wade. In fact, it can cope with up to one metre of water, more than any previous Defender.

Yet the prevailing soundtrack in regular mode is a distant tyre rumble, not least because our car is running the optional Goodyear DuraTrac Advanced All Terrain rubber. That's essential because we'll be driving the Octa in a variety of bruising contexts. They look suitably chunky on the Octa's understated new 20in alloy wheel, and are the largest tyres yet fitted to the Defender. Their three ply construction improves the strength of the sidewall, but they're speed restricted to 100mph (112mph in North America). More importantly, they also compromise on road handling, though not by much according to JLR's vehicle attributes guru, former Lotus and Aston Martin man Matt Becker. Most Octas will end up running the Michelin all season tyres on 22in alloys.

One short push on the rather cheap looking Octa button on the lower part of the steering wheel takes us into Dynamic mode. This perks things up considerably. Steering, throttle, suspension and exhaust note all get more alert and responsive. But the secret sauce here arrives via the '6D dynamics' air suspension tech (the name refers to the 6° of axis a rigid body can move in a 3D space). Rather than traditional anti-roll bars, the Octa uses hydraulically interlinked, triple valve semi-active dampers that provide independent compression and rebound control. Yep, that's the same tech that McLaren uses in the 750S. There are also new control arms, links and knuckles. While nobody is going to mistake the Octa for a Mac, there's a suppleness to its ride and its body movements are well controlled. It really handles. Head toss is usually an issue in SUVs, but there's little sign of it here.

On a tightening mountain pass the Octa's ace card is its noticeably faster steering. I'm still not sure it would have answers up here for the likes of the Aston Martin DBX707 or Lamborghini Urus S, both of which are genuine entertainers (and pricier). But then no one in their right mind would venture fully off road in either of those. If you want to change gear using the paddleshift you need to slide the gear selector across into 'Sport', which is an odd oversight.

The Defender is certainly at one with the rolling vistas that surround us. It's difficult to imagine a car more attuned to this landscape, a shapeshifting mix of emotive mountains, vast plains and wilderness. The sky is pretty much the bluest blue I've ever seen, what clouds there are an impossibly fluffy white. It's Africa out there. But this is also a good time to get reacquainted with the Defender's interior. JLR's chief creative officer Gerry McGovern loves the idea of "materiality", and there's lots to love and fondle in a Defender. The dash architecture is

DEFENDER
LAND ROVER

Racing line? Nah, in an Octa you take the beeline

Defender rules: if the satnav knows where you are, you're doing it wrong

BEWARE OF BABOONS

Normally the moment you admit to being lost... here it's where the fun begins

DEFENDER
AIRBAG

OCTA TECH

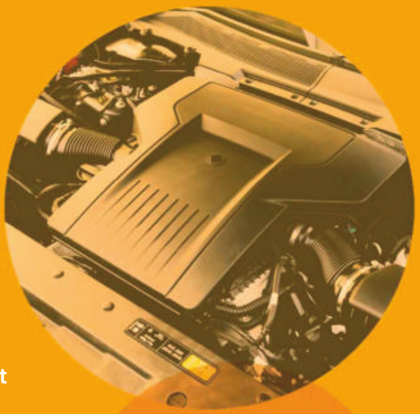
LAND ROVER DEFENDER OCTA EDITION ONE

Price: £160,800
Powertrain: 4.4-litre twin turbo V8, 626bhp, 553lb ft
Transmission: 8spd auto, 4WD
Performance: 0–62mph in 4.0secs, 155mph (tyre dependent)
Economy: 21.7mpg, 294g/km CO_2
Weight: 2,585kg

OCTA Mode Selected

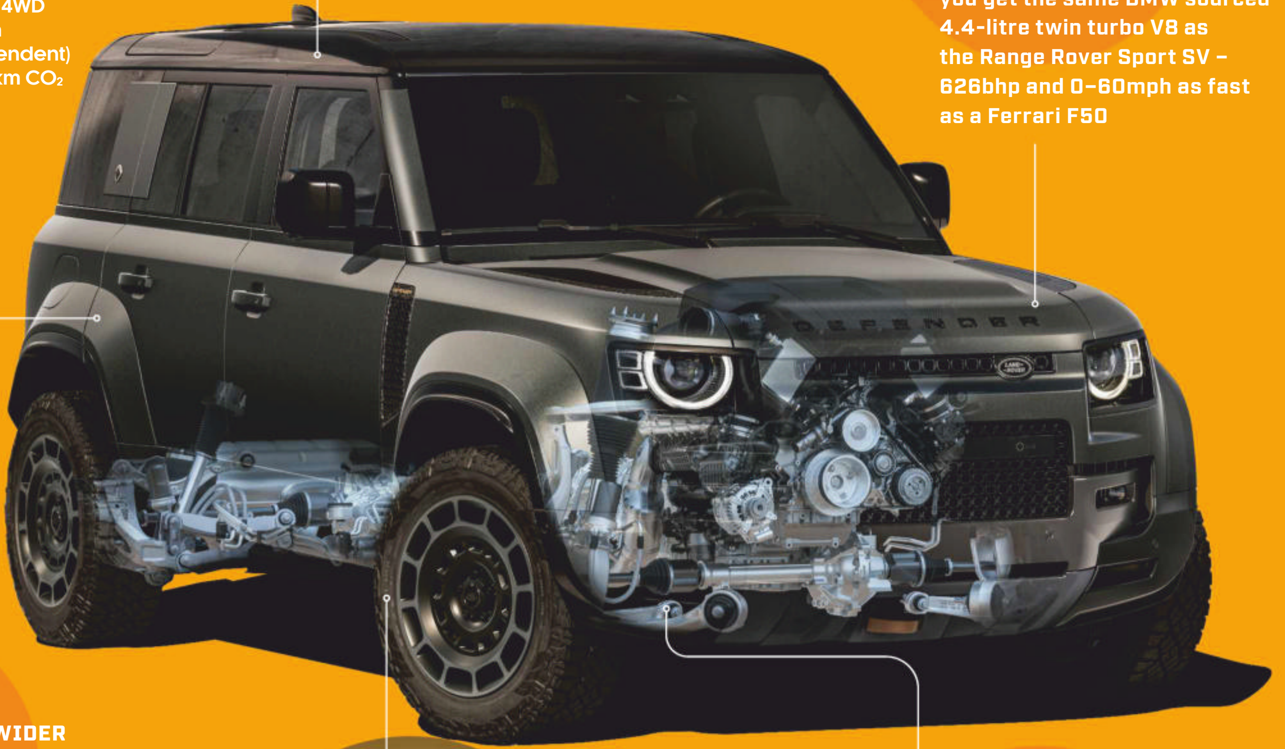
OCTA MODE

SHORT PRESS OF OCTA BUTTON activates Dynamic mode – 67 per cent less roll resistance, more steering weight, open exhaust valves. Hold the button for Octa mode: rapid off roading thanks to less roll resistance, more wheel travel, 80 per cent of power to the rear wheels. Jumps and drifts a gogo



TURBO POWER

YOU CAN GET A SUPERCHARGED 5.0-litre V8 with up to 518bhp in the cooking Defender... here you get the same BMW sourced 4.4-litre twin turbo V8 as the Range Rover Sport SV – 626bhp and 0–60mph as fast as a Ferrari F50



STANCE

TO ACCOMMODATE WIDER and chunkier tyres the arches have swollen, adding 68mm in overall width. Ride height is 28mm above standard too, so wading depth climbs from 900mm to a round metre

RUBBER

CHOOSE BETWEEN 22IN WHEELS with all season tyres (vmax 155mph), intermediate BF Goodrich all terrains on 20-inch rims (vmax 130mph) or 'Advanced' all terrain Goodyear Duratracs (vmax 100mph). Ours was wearing the third option

6D SUSPENSION

6D DYNAMIC AIR SUSPENSION to be precise. Crosslinked three valve hydraulic dampers (like a McLaren 750S) give precise control of how much body roll is allowed on and off road. Also no need for anti-roll bars so wheel articulation improves. Win win

You're never more than 5cm from civilisation if you drive one of these

"You *can* park there mate, though you're about to be blocked in by a Unimog"

Jason briefly toys with the idea of wading home through the Atlantic

BAIN'S KLOOF PASS
For 25 km

“YOU WILL NEVER ENJOY DRIVING SO SLOWLY MORE THAN THIS”

wonderfully simple, the touchscreen easy to use, the trim robust but tactile. There’s also more recycled carbon on the centre console. New for Octa are “body and soul” seats which use vibro acoustic, AI enabled tech and a quartet of transducers to deliver tactile as well as aural audio. A neat trick, augmented with six wellness programmes that push the idea of the massage seat to the limit. The seats themselves are also new – they’re seam free and supremely comfortable. Our car is trimmed in a sustainable Ultrafabric (™) that’s much lighter than leather and its production generates a quarter of the CO_2. The central storage compartment is refrigerated and there are USB-C ports all over the place. The Octa is a highly functional bit of kit.

The steering wheel is also new, and has translucent, edge lit paddleshifters. These glow red when Dynamic or Octa modes are selected. We follow a long gravel road, maintaining an impressive pace despite the loose surface and getting sideways on the turns. The Octa can hit 62mph in four seconds and tops out at 155mph on the all season tyres.

When we get to Bushmans Kloof, things kick up another few notches. Want to talk bandwidth? Here’s the place. There’s an easy way into the lodgings that sit in the middle of this 18,500 acre private reserve, but what fun would that be? Our hosts have improvised a test track around a lake, but first we have to crawl across the landscape to get to it. We see zebras and baboons en route. The latter have apparently figured out how to open doors in the lodge, but are still confused by keys.

The Defender’s terrain response makes priming it for hardcore off roading ridiculously easy. One button push selects the low range transmission, another puts it into the appropriate mode, active electronically controlled centre and rear differentials doing the heavy lifting. Trust me, you will never enjoy driving so slowly more than when you’re confronted by a series of apparently insurmountable boulders. The windscreen is full of sky one minute, the next it’s ground. We have spotters to help but even so, this is very cool indeed.

And that’s just for starters. Now we engage Octa mode and really go for it. This is the point where the Defender waves goodbye to those well bred rivals and goes next level. New software algorithms identify rough surfaces by monitoring suspension movements and the control modules in the dampers and the ABS. The Octa has 400mm diameter front brake discs with six pot Brembo calipers, 365mm diameter jobs at the rear. A boost system minimises fade. It stops as well as it goes.

Matt Becker does a demo run round the arena, taking eye popping liberties with the car, finding a line that looks impossible but clearly isn’t. Then it’s our turn. With the DSC off, the Octa blasts along the track like a plus size WRC car, responding to Scandi flicks with the keenness of something half its size and weight. There are crests and yomps here that would pulverise most things but it remains supremely unflustered, its damping and wheel articulation always on the money. In fact, the system’s so smart it even knows when you’re airborne and primes the suspension for landing. Talk about being up for it.

It’s equally good on the sand dunes we find in Lambert’s bay, a slower but even more technical off roading challenge. The only thing we do here is drop the tyre pressures to 20psi, and remember to maintain momentum without applying too much throttle. That’s when you get stuck, easily done in sand so soft and fickle that one of our on hand experts reckons it’s the trickiest he’s ever encountered.

At which point it’s tempting to take the Defender Octa for granted. Given everything it can do, it’s really in a class of its own. Sure, some rivals are even better in extreme conditions, but you definitely won’t have as much fun on the way there. It’s plenty fast, secure, and confidence inspiring. It’s the rock ’n’ roll Defender, only with a lot less roll.

4X4 RISING

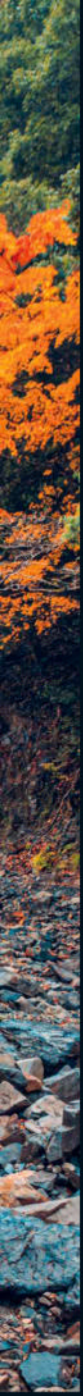
When it comes to off roaders, the Japanese don't do things by the book…

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY TOBY THYER

Dirt Supply
Crazy, Custom, Factory
4X4 Presents

"THE JAPANESE ARE EXTREMELY GOOD AT PROBLEM SOLVING"

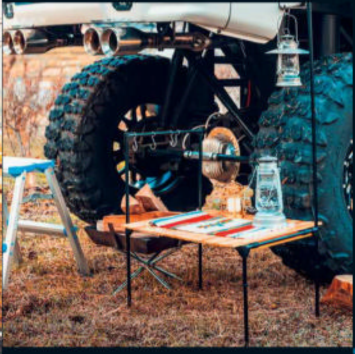
SUZUKI
58-50



We're crawling along a river bed, a convoy of Jimnys and Buggies unperturbed by boulders and icy torrents. "It doesn't look like Japan, right?" a driver yells, while wrestling his Suzuki over Martian terrain surrounded by mountains covered in an explosive display of autumnal colours. He's definitely been on the sake, because you couldn't get any more Japanese than this.

What he means, I think, is that despite Japan building some of the world's greatest off roaders, and the country being 75 per cent mountain and 65 per cent dense forest, off roading isn't as popular as you might think. Not compared to Australia, the UK or US.

Japan's 27 million acres of national parks pales in comparison to the USA's 840 million and gives you an idea of the restrictions faced when the desire to bash some bogholes takes hold. Thankfully, there are more ways than one to enjoy your 4x4, and the Japanese are extremely good at problem solving. They've figured out ways to get their 4x4s higher, further and more comfortable than they were ever designed to be…



The Alley Motors

Original plan was to meet in an underground car park, but the ceiling would have taken the headlights out

CHAPTER ONE

CITY SLICKERS

Google 'silly cars – Japan' and you'll be fed images of kei trucks and kaido racers, or maybe even those *Mario Kart* go-karts that whizz around central Tokyo. But those are all white belt, this lot are 10th degree black belt bizarre. The locals call them 'high lift'. Inspired by American monster trucks, they are the exact opposite of the Japanese kei truck.

Back in the 1980s and 1990s, these giants roamed the streets of major cities across Japan. Hilux trucks, Land Cruisers and Delicas all became favourites among Japan's cash laden youth. All good things come to an end though, and once the economic bubble burst, these behemoths started dying out.

One garage in the northern city of Sendai, though, keeps the side exit torches burning – 4x4 Presents builds and supplies parts for high lift vehicles across Japan and the Hilux truck they brought along was nothing short of insane.

The most common 4x4 lift kits available will give you a 3in–6in lift, usually raising the body off the chassis for better approach and departure clearance. This Hilux however, has gone for a staggering 22in lift. Ignoring the extra height from the 44in Super Swamper tyres and 15x13-inch wheels, the Hilux has the majority of its lift from the 36in Rancho suspension components.

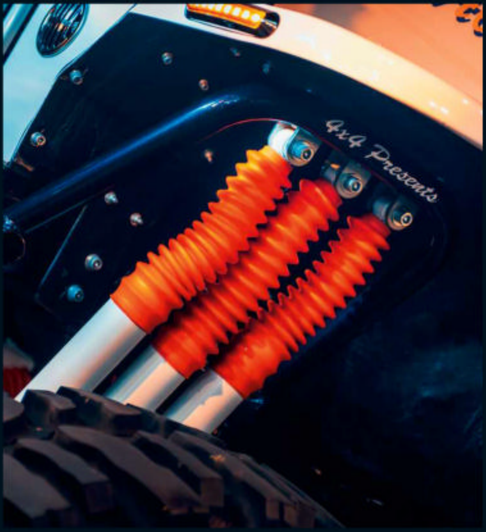
The Land Cruiser is a little more conventional, with a 3in lift on the leaf springs, four inches on the body and four inches on the shackles. Throw on some 12-inch wide Centerline wheels and 42-inch Super Swamper tyres and you get an overall lift of around 17 inches. Modest, but it still requires a step to climb onboard.

Then there's the Mitsubishi Jeep, based on the car that beat Toyota in the bid to supply Jeeps to the Americans during the Korean war. This one is a J55 Turbo Diesel built by 4x4 Presents, with 23in Rancho and Pro Comp Shocks, an LJ78 Prado front end swap and Toyota electric power steering to help turn those 39in Super Swampers.

These trucks dwarf their owners and anything else on the road, they hark back to a time when enthusiasts were pushing the limits of tuning and modifying and prove nobody embraces the nonsensical quite like the Japanese.

Believe it or not, these are the optional, low rolling resistance tyres

Jet Black
CHARIOT
Rockin in the Weekend
カラオケ
受付2F
パーティルーム完備!!
駅前横丁
能開センター


4x4 Presents

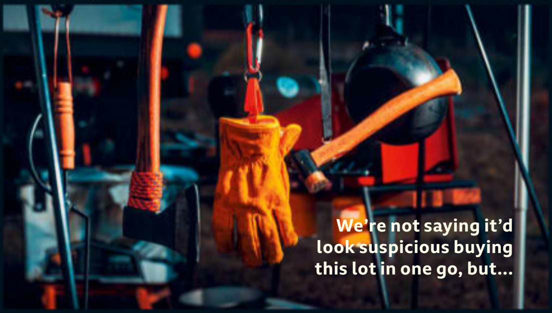
Jet Black
CHARIOT

At least, that's what its fans know it by. To its owner it's called Frank

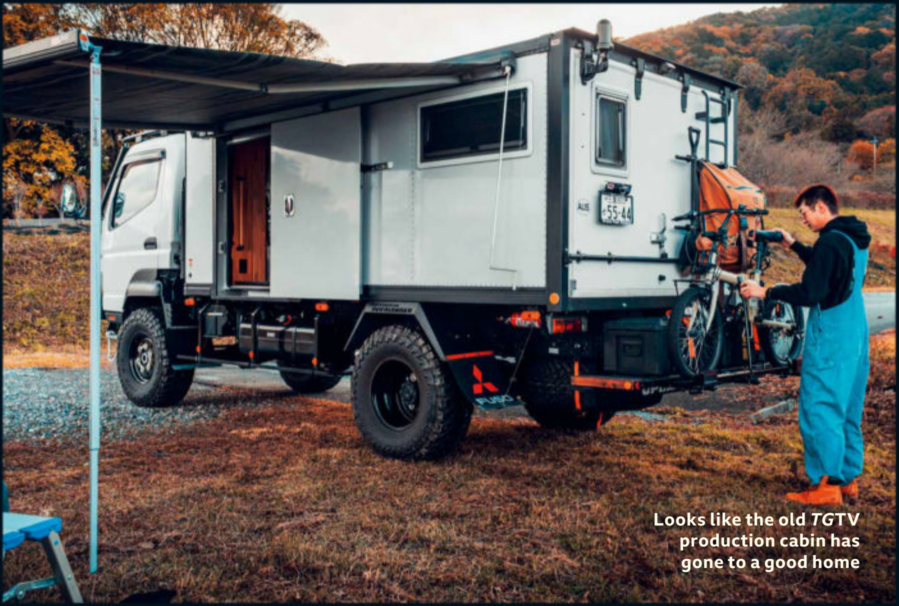
Crazy, Custom, Factory
4X4 Presents

If it's not Yorkshire Tea, Takito-san isn't interested

It's just like taking your top floor flat on holiday with you



We're not saying it'd look suspicious buying this lot in one go, but...



Looks like the old *TGTV* production cabin has gone to a good home

CHAPTER TWO

OFF GRID

Ah, the great outdoors. Fresh air, endless sky and the instant need to stand hunched over the blackened bars of a sausage laden BBQ. Of course, the reality of camping in the UK is a caravan in a boggy field eating lukewarm baked beans on toast, but whichever way you look at it, camping requires a whole lot of stuff to make the ordeal bearable. This is where the Japanese excel. Being comfortable is as much a part of Japanese culture as mastering chopsticks or eating hamburgers without the buns.

Portable stoves, drip coffee brewing, assorted bento boxes and comfy chairs all slot together with unparallelled levels of organisation. The outdoor lifestyle is big business in Japan and the number of gizmos and gadgets is impressive. Unfortunately, there are very few places in Japan where wild camping is actually allowed.

Even campsites high up in the mountains, miles from civilisation, will be well serviced with loos, cooking facilities and flat grassy pitching areas. Luckily, Takato-san, Yoshi-san and Junpei-san were keen for an adventure in their Canter, Delica and Star Wagon respectively, and know the choice spots.

Inside the Canter looks more like a typical Tokyo studio apartment. A double bed, galley kitchen and dining area all feel cosy surrounded by the timber cladding built by Takito-san. He tells me he was inspired by overlanders he's seen in Australia. Down under, and Stateside too, overlanding is a way of life for many. Vast open spaces and rugged terrain that stretch out for hundreds of miles have become the back garden for many who choose to live a nomadic life, and Japanese 4x4s like the Canter and Toyota Dyna are about as hardcore as you can get when it comes to camping trucks.

Pro tip: park your camper over the fire for instant underfloor heating

CHAPTER THREE

WHERE WE'RE GOING WE DON'T NEED ROADS

Back to that river bed. I knew that Jimnys had a reputation for being capable off roaders, but this is just on another level. Walking alongside them, they had less trouble than I did on foot.

I'm with an assortment of deconstructed Jimnys and a tube frame buggy. Full disclosure, there are probably more challenging trails and off-road parks for getting those wheels up and down in articulation, but for the convenience of getting this ragtag bunch together, in a picturesque location, we've gathered here, in the mountains of Gifu prefecture.

Finding places to enjoy the great outdoors from the comfort of your 4x4 is a bit tricky in Japan. Shiro-san, today's unofficial leader and owner of the off-roading shop Benchmade, tells me there aren't really any written rules about not being able to drive through state owned land, but it's generally frowned upon. The trick is to find places where there will be minimum disturbance to both human and environmental communities.

"So kids. When two 4x4s love each other very much..."

Jimnys are the weapon of choice, and today's selection is representative of what's in vogue. Lift kits, big tyres and bigger torque from tiny motors are the recipe for success. The red one has a tiny LJ50 two stroke and sounds like a 50cc scooter. The lighter you are, the more chance of reaching the top.

The second generation SJ30/SJ40 Jimnys are the ones you want. Even a stock car will go beyond what you'd imagine with only a moderate lift and decent suspension. Most owners will remove half the body, replace it with a tube frame for rigidity and swap running gear with Land Cruiser parts.

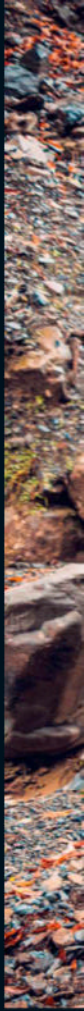
Apparently, when you relieve a Land Cruiser's running gear from its heavy old body, the parts longevity increases tenfold. Front axles, drive shafts and differentials are all modified and fortified to transform these little Jimnys into unstoppable, indestructible rock crawlers.

To stop the cars from ripping your arms out of their sockets, most use three power steering units – one at the steering wheel column, one at the knuckle and one down on the actual steering rack itself.

As the riverbed narrows, the boulders grow. It's getting more difficult to keep up with Shiro-san and his band of merry mentalists. Rather than go around the obstacles like any sane person would, these guys seem hell bent on taking the most difficult route possible. Don't go round it, go through it, seems to be the ethos.

At this point, the cars claw and grip themselves over a small waterfall, and one car ends up on its side.

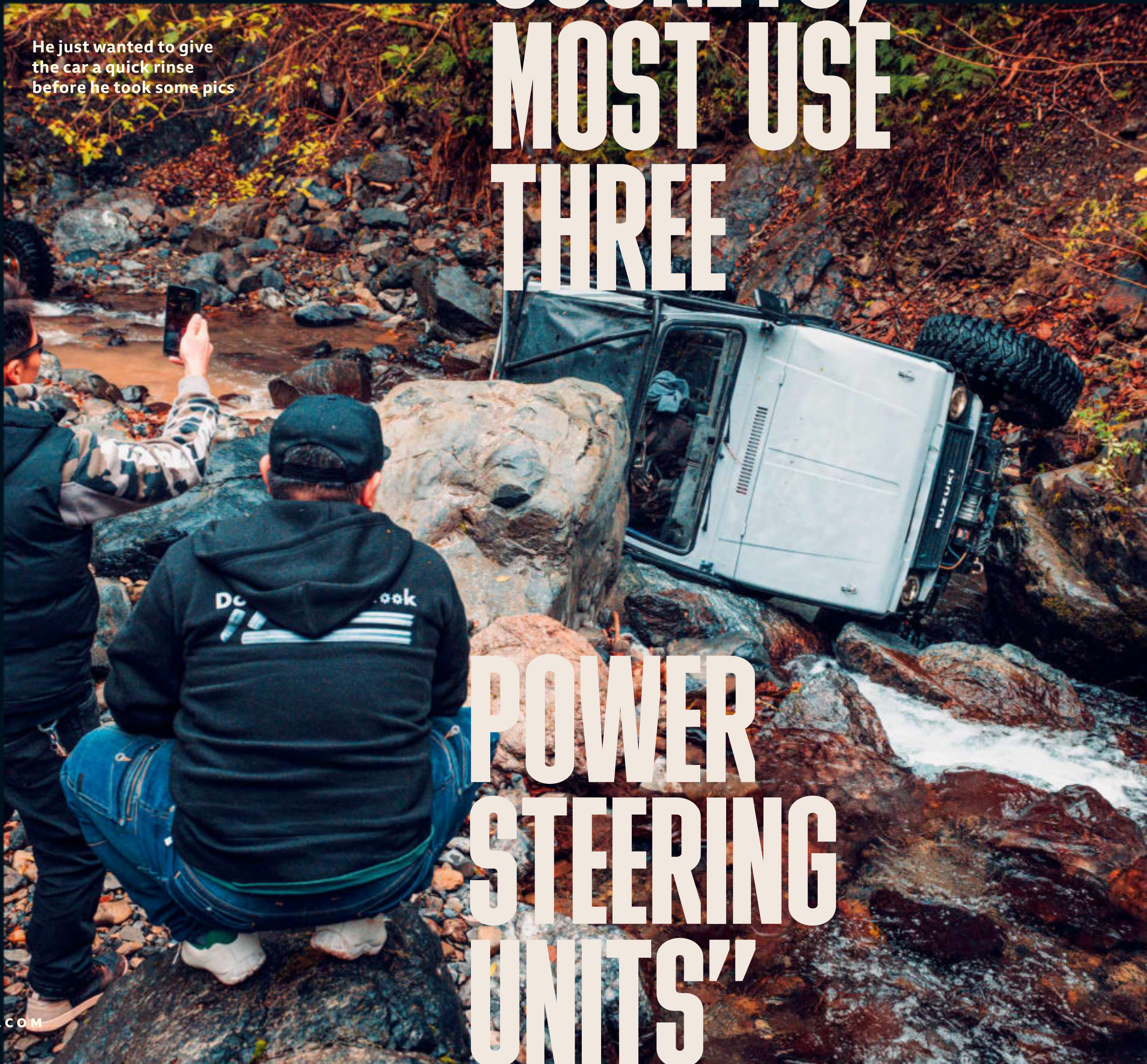
There's a cheer of encouragement. My concern for the driver goes unnoticed. Once the Jimny is rocked gently upright and he makes it through, I ask if he was OK, although he seemed more concerned about my camera getting splashed in the topple. "This kind of thing happens all the time, it's part of the fun." Ⓣ



> "TO STOP THE CARS FROM RIPPING YOUR ARMS OUT OF THEIR SOCKETS, MOST USE THREE POWER STEERING UNITS"

LONGFIELD
SUPER AXLES
POWERED BY TRAIL GEAR

Covering up the fuel gauge with a sticker. Classic denial behaviour



He just wanted to give the car a quick rinse before he took some pics

benchmade46

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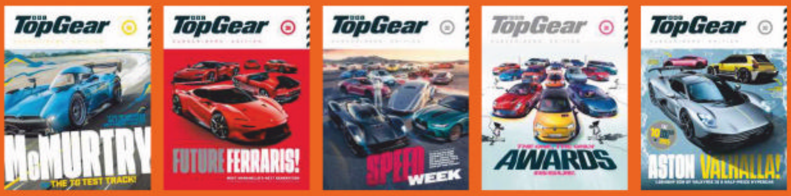

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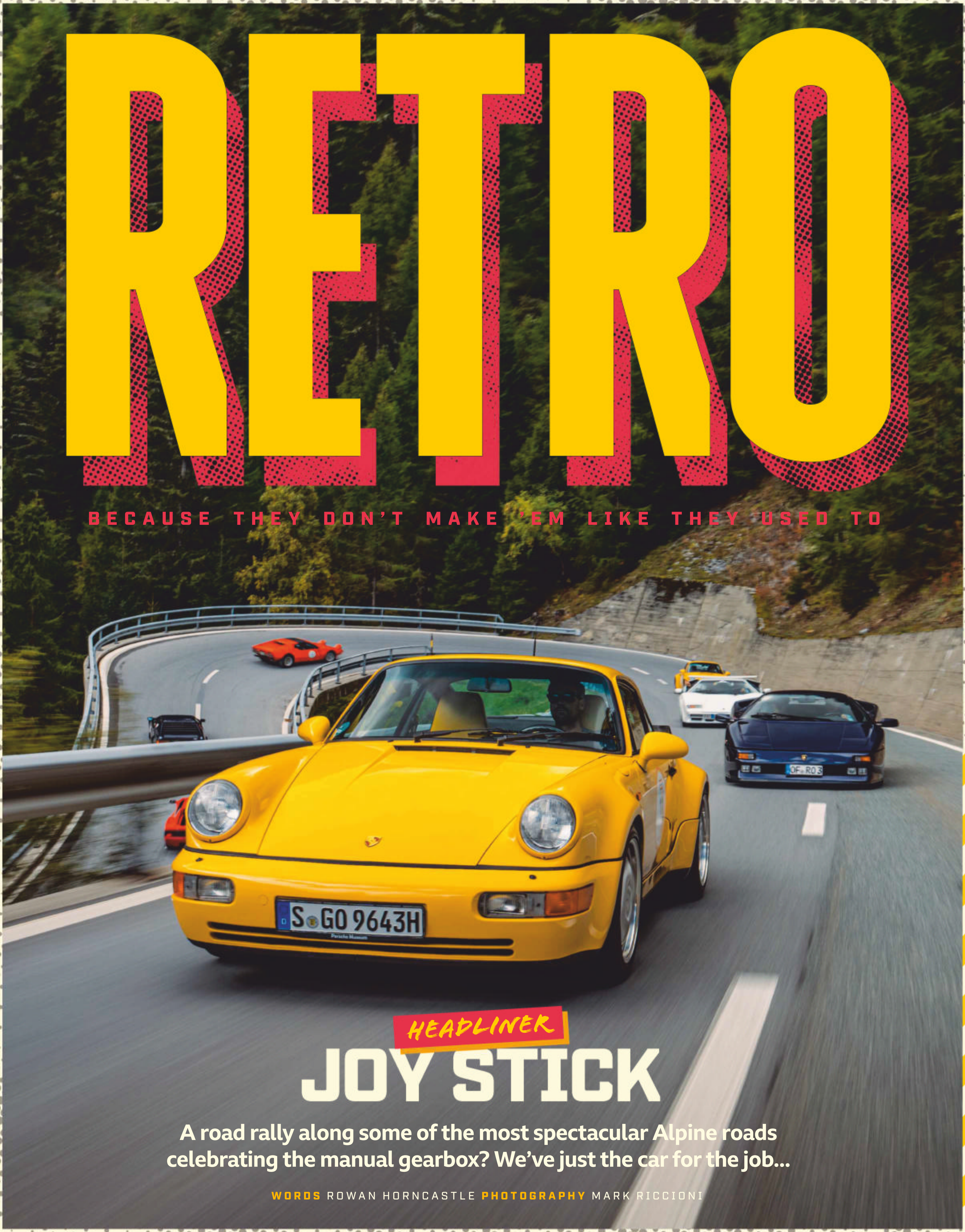
RETRO

BECAUSE THEY DON'T MAKE 'EM LIKE THEY USED TO



HEADLINER

JOY STICK

A road rally along some of the most spectacular Alpine roads celebrating the manual gearbox? We've just the car for the job...

WORDS ROWAN HORNCASTLE **PHOTOGRAPHY** MARK RICCIONI

R.U.O.T.B.

Five letters that mean nothing more than seven potential points in a game of Scrabble. But if you mix them up, you get... TURBO. And that's not just a word. It's the fastest word in the world – *the* superlative for speed and performance.

Over the years, 'Turbo' has been slapped on everything from hairdryers to counter culture movements. But for Porsche, it's a legacy, a legend and a brand of its own. It's also just turned 50. So, I thought we'd better have a birthday party and celebrate half a century of Porsche bolting mechanical snails onto engines in the name of speed. Lovely, juicy, usable – and sometimes scary – speed. And what better way to do that than by driving one of the most under the radar, rarest turbocharged 911s to one of the coolest events you've never heard of – the Super Stick Shift.

For those of you at the back, turbocharging works by using high energy exhaust gases to spin a turbine, which in turn drives a compressor that forces more air into the engine's combustion chambers. It creates a rather intoxicating and simple equation: more fuel equals more power.

It was aviation technology, but the Americans were the first to have the nerve to try it out in cars. In 1962, GM bolted a Garrett AiResearch turbo onto an Oldsmobile F-85 Cutlass to create the excellently named 'Jetfire'. It was complex and provided a 40 per cent power increase, which also meant it was horrendously unreliable.

The first European marque to hop on the turbo train was BMW, which released the 2002 Turbo in 1973. But Porsche had been experimenting with the technology before that in motorsport. The wildly successful 917/10 and 917/30 race cars were proof of the potential, but the company needed time to tame turbocharging's tumultuous traits before handing it over to hamfisted buyers.

It was at the 1973 Frankfurt Motor Show that a tartan clad RSR Turbo concept (which resembled a 911 Carrera RS 3.0) debuted to a slack jawed crowd. Just over a year later, the production version was unveiled in Paris, with Ferry Porsche presenting the very first car, affectionately dubbed "No. 1", to his sister Louise Piëch as a 70th birthday gift.

There have been eight generations since and to celebrate this dynasty, I needed to pick one. My choice? One of the most iconic Turbos ever: a yellow over yellow, 3.6-litre 964 Turbo. Or, as it's better known to those less obsessed with chassis codes, The *Bad Boys* Car.

This particular 964 is one of the rarest aircooled 911s. The later 3.6-litre variant was Porsche's response to grumbles that the standard 3.3-litre engine (shared with the previous 930 generation) felt a bit flat. So, it increased the displacement, boosted power to 355bhp, and focused on generating more torque at lower revs. It also featured a 20mm lower chassis, retuned suspension, and some ace 18-inch three-piece Speedline wheels.

Now, here's something you may not know – it was only available for a single year, from 1993 to 1994, with fewer than 1,500 units produced. That makes it even rarer than the hallowed 911 Carrera RS 2.7, and values now crest over £500k. If that's not a scary enough reminder not to shunt it, mine is also Porsche's rolling museum piece.

Thumbing the door open provides a sensational mix of haptic and audio feedback. Your nose then gets in on the sensory attack by vacuuming up that distinctive, yet hard to define, old car smell. Lovely. Step inside, and even on the dullest of grey days, you'll find yourself reaching for sunglasses. They skinned Big Bird for the yellow leather – fantastically vivid and utterly unapologetic. It's a sensory attack in the best possible way.

You wear the one-piece seats like a shell and peer through a vast steering wheel, over the pillow sized airbag, to gaze at a bank of huge analogue clocks with sweeping dials and a screaming redline. Down and to your right, there's a hi-fi nestled alongside a period correct Nokia phone – the ultimate accessory for phoning in your excuses about why you're inevitably running late.

The flat-six engine is so smooth it's almost deceptive – turn it over, and there are moments you have to double check it's actually running. But looking out through the glasshouse, you have two big arches and protruding headlights to help guide your placement of the car. The real treat, though, is what's in the rearview mirror – the colossal, rubberised whale tail spoiler, home to the whopping intercooler. The clutch is heavy, throttle floor mounted and full of resistance. The gearbox isn't particularly tight but has extremely tall gearing.

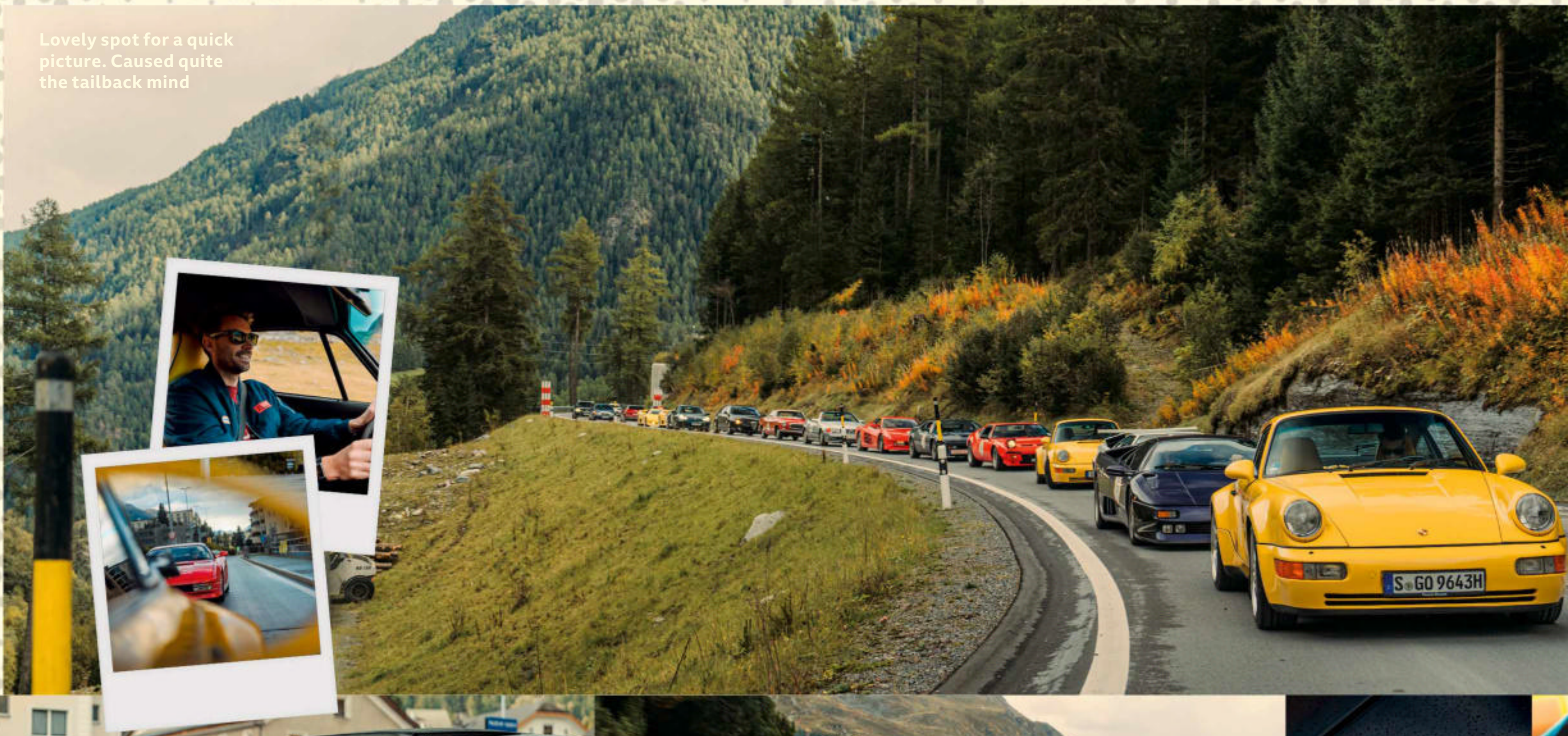
Driving the 964 is hard work – it's physical and demands concentration. There's a lot to manage, especially on the wet Alpine roads of Switzerland. But that's perfect, because today, this isn't just a car – it's a ticket.

The Super Stick Shift is a road rally with an extremely strict dress code. Cars have to be built between 1974 and 1995, be top of the range sports or supercars, have manual transmissions, two doors and no electronic assistance. It's purposely designed as a pilgrimage for those who still worship the mechanical purity of driving. And the eligible car list is a droolworthy PDF of esoteric exotica. There's everything from hen's teeth Alpinas to Cizetas and Isdera Spiders. Luckily, the 964 is on the guest list, so I can slip behind the velvet stanchion.

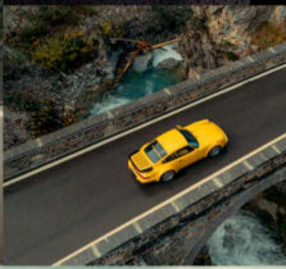
Fits like a glove, smooth as double cream, goes like the clappers

S GO 9643H
Super Stick Shift
PORSCHE

"DRIVING THE 964 IS HARD WORK, THERE'S A LOT TO MANAGE – ESPECIALLY ON ALPINE ROADS"

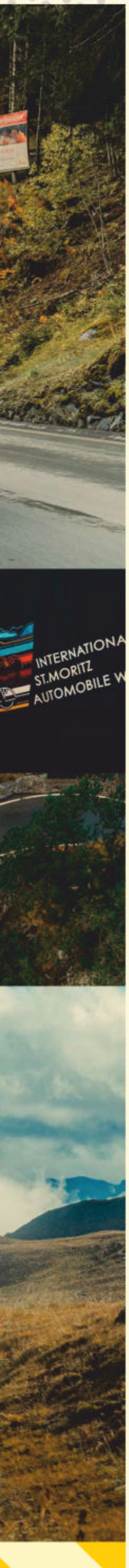


Lovely spot for a quick picture. Caused quite the tailback mind



"THE SYMPHONY OF SIX, EIGHT, AND 12 CYLINDERS RICOCHETS OFF THE MOUNTAINSIDE"

The hills were alive... with the sound of natural aspiration



Arriving at the start line in St Moritz is like driving into a pack of vintage Top Trumps. There's a chain of wonderfully wedgy, tricky to see out of, even harder to drive supercars – Ferrari Testarossas, multiple Lamborghini Diablos, BMW M1s, a Jaguar XJ220, a cocaine-white winged Countach, and a De Tomaso Pantera. There's even another 3.6 Turbo, albeit fitted with the even rarer X-pack. Turns out, he's the previous owner of the car I'm driving. Small world.

Ahead of us lies a 450-mile route along some of the most spectacular Alpine roads that splinter and spiderweb their way around St Moritz and its incredible topography: the Julier, Albula and Flüela passes, just to name a few. Another fun variable thrown into the mix is that it's unseasonably cold, wet, and, the higher we climb, increasingly snowy.

We head straight into a set of Swiss roadworks. Well, that's what they call them. It's more like driving through a World War One trench. At this point, some owners might turn around and tuck their cars back into humidified garages. Not this lot. They don't collect cars – they drive them... and drive them hard. What starts as a procession quickly turns into something resembling a road race. Which is perfect, because as I find out, the 964 Turbo isn't a car for pussyfooting around.

Being an old school turbocharged car, you've got a wave of boost to be constantly mindful of. The turbo lag – that moment of quiet before the storm – feels like a comedic pause before a punchline that comes in at 3,500rpm. With tall gears and tight roads, you've got to keep busy and on boost. It's easy enough to manage on a track, but on winding Swiss mountain roads, it's a challenge. You have to drive the 964 aggressively, with precise and deliberate inputs to get the best out of it.

Famously, early Turbos earned the nickname 'widowmakers', but the 964 doesn't seem as capricious or spiky as I'd been led to believe. Yes, you can't cheat physics – that big, heavy engine behind the rear axle can easily become a pendulum – but as long as you understand momentum and weight transfer, you're fine. Throughout the day cockpits slowly clog up with condensation (these are 1980s and 1990s supercars after all), which adds to the fun as the landscape gets bigger and so aggressively pretty that Instagram tags it with an AI warning. And that's before you add the cars into the mix.

Unrestricted and from eras of excess, the symphony of six, eight, and 12 cylinders of varying layouts ricochets off the mountainside in joyous glory. The Turbo can achieve extraordinary speed for its age, but it's all done with subtle elegance. After all, Turbos have always been about sophisticated understatement and unprecedented everyday usability.

The Albula Pass is a masterpiece of tight hairpins, steep drops and sweeping corners. Throw in a trainline that weaves its way both around and through the landscape, and you've got a road that would send Francis Bourgeois into a seizure. But it's here that it hits me – this rally exemplifies the horseriding analogy everyone's been going on about with rise of the EV.

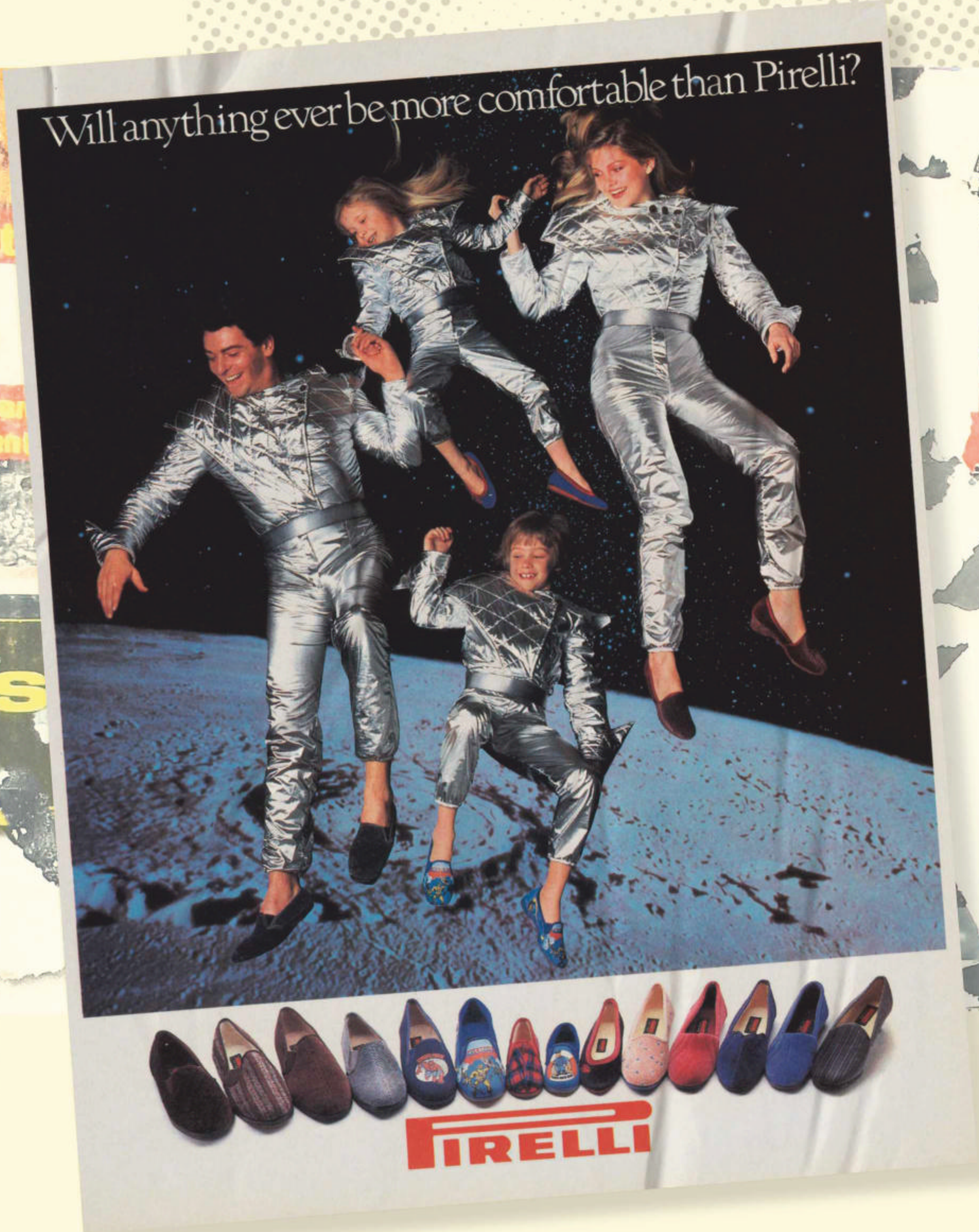
If you haven't heard, the gist is that, in the future, analogue internal combustion cars will be used in the same way people now use horses. After all, we once used horses as our primary mode of transport, but they were eventually replaced by cars. Yet, there's a certain type of person who still seeks the thrill of a gallop for pure adrenaline.

A ray of old school sunshine in the greyish gloom

The same, they say, will happen with internal combustion cars when the world inevitably turns electric. People like us will use them as instruments of passion. And after experiencing the Super Stick Shift, I'm inclined to agree. The cars in this incredible, poster worthy rally are a snapshot of a time when driving was all about feel, skill, and that raw connection between human and machine. It's infectious, it's undeniable, and it's something everyone should experience before it's lost to history or the next EU mandate.

I round off the day by meeting the latest heir to the Turbo throne, the 992 'Turbo 50' – Porsche's £200k gift to itself. Slathered with vinyl inspired by the Porsche 911 RSR Turbo and wearing lusciously metallic Turbonite paint, it's tasteful with a bit of tart. But let's not kid ourselves – it's essentially a posh Turbo S. Driving it is a world away from the 964, far easier, more polished. Yet, in spite of that, the similarities are unmistakable – the power delivery, the boost, that effortless surge of performance – it's clear they're cut from the same Mackenzie tartan cloth.

So, raise a stein to 50 years of turbocharged Porsches. It's just a shame that Porsche is now slapping the Turbo badge on cars that don't even have a turbocharger. Still, I suppose it means Turbos could be around for 50 more. After all, it's the fastest word in the world.


Will anything ever be more comfortable than Pirelli?
PIRELLI

Car ads that time forgot

PIRELLI, 1980s

Don't worry, we're as baffled as you. We know Pirelli used to make slippers, but we're pretty sure they didn't take you to the moon. What's the message here? That its tyres are so soft it's like wearing comfy house shoes? Or its slippers grip like a set of cut slicks? Whatever, it's classic 'shock and awe' to make you stop and think about a product… and the insanity of how tight trousers were in the 1980s.

IMAGES: ALAMY

BEER
o'clock

That time we...

RECREATED SMOKEY AND THE BANDIT

I have often been accused of not factoring in enough time for photography on a shoot. On this occasion I also forgot to account for eating, sleeping and going to the toilet.

A company called Trans Am Worldwide is to blame. It had just built a Chevy Camaro SS-based tribute to the 1977 Trans Am roundly abused by Burt Reynolds in the all time movie classic – *Smokey and the Bandit* – complete with 717bhp 7.4-litre supercharged V8. Our mission was clear: borrow the car and see if we could do what Bo Bandit had done before – drive from Atlanta, Georgia to Texarkana, Texas (to secure a crate or two of bootleg beer) and back in 28 hours.

Well, we donned our stetson (standard equipment) and gave it a go, dodging cops, guzzling fuel, drag racing a man with a wooden leg called Slick Jim, securing the beer and friends wherever we went.

Total trip: 1,450.4 miles in a little under 32 hours. Total sleep: 83 extremely sweaty minutes in a service station car park. Were it not for photos and our detour to the drag strip, we would have done it. Failure, yes, but a can of warm Coors has never tasted so good.

WORDS: JACK RIX

REMEMBERING
RETRO GAMING
THE CLASSICS

#65

Round Up 5

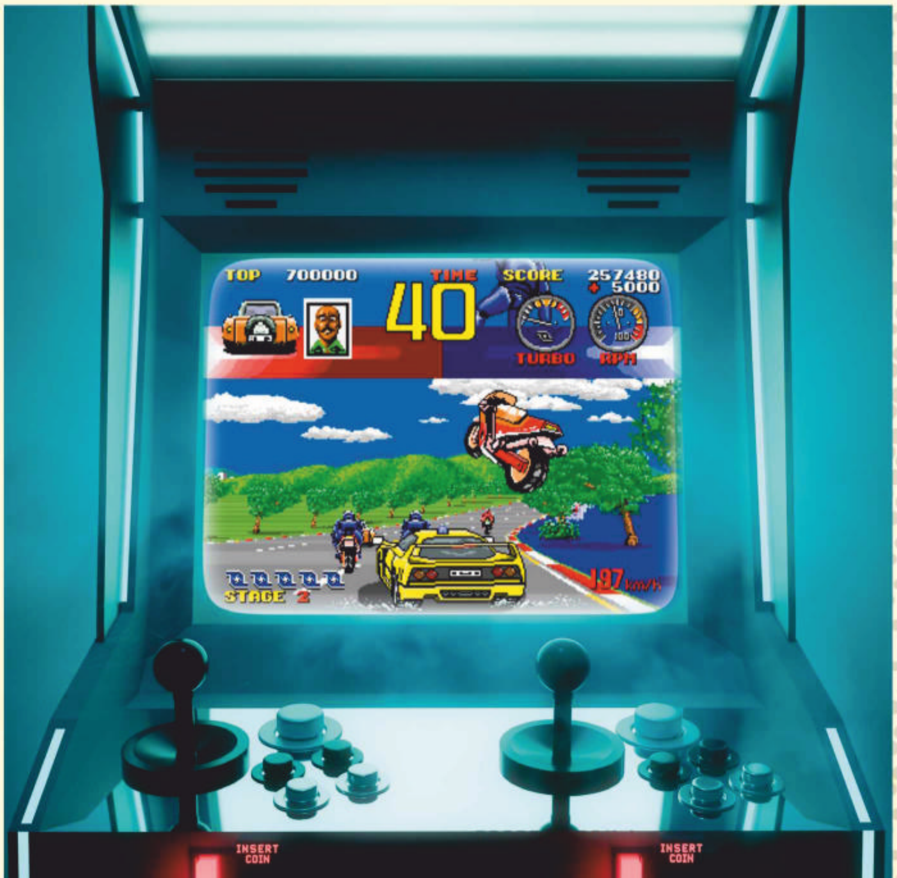
ARCADE, 1989

Now we know what you're thinking: will I understand *Round Up 5: Super Delta Force* if I haven't played the previous four games? Well don't worry because, not only were there no 'previous four games', you'll definitely understand *Round Up 5* if you ever played *Chase HQ*, which was the game that this merrily and shamelessly ripped off.

Round Up 5 did offer its own spin on the formula. For a start, rather than settling for a relatively modest Porsche 928, *Round Up 5* opted for a bright yellow Ferrari F40. If you're not going to pay manufacturer licensing fees anyway, why settle for less? It also borrowed *OutRun*'s schtick of splitting the road at the end of each stage, giving you the option of which criminal to pursue next. Given that these locations tended to involve blasting across state lines, it does raise some questions about the jurisdiction in which cops in Ferrari F40s tend to operate.

Round Up 5's truly unique contribution to the genre, though, was the fact that every end of stage boss was protected by a cadre of robots on motorcycles. To stop the criminal's car, you first had to ram these androids off their bikes. There was no story explanation as to how this gang had got hold of this sci-fi technology, but we reckon the truth has something to do with how horrifying it would be to watch a supercar scything through the bikes, sending bodies careening in all directions.

Successfully clearing the motorcycle escort and crashing into the target vehicle three times made the suspect surrender by waving a white flag, which they presumably stashed in the footwell. Best of all, two further police F40s then screeched to a halt, demonstrating that whoever was in charge of vehicle procurement absolutely had their priorities straight. **MIKE CHANNELL**



IMAGES: GETTY

DO/~~DON'T~~ MEET YOUR HEROES

TOYOTA MR2 MKII

£10,000 (£15,440 new)

2.0 4cyl	158 bhp	7.6 secs	47.9 mpg	1,275 kg

HERO Cheap to buy, economical and fabulous looks

ZERO No power steering, sounds like a van at times, base for many kit cars

MY UPBRINGING IN A FAMILY OF carholics coincided with the fabulous era of 1990s Japan, when NSXs battled Ferraris, GT-Rs broke Nürburgring records and the first of the 10-second Supras emerged. Toyota ruled my roost, not the MR2 initially, but the MkIV Supra. It was the first 'fast' vehicle I was introduced to: my brother owned a twin turbo mimic of the one in *Fast and Furious*. He even used it as the courier car for his chippy.

My early enthusiasm for pestering my siblings to teach me about cars, combined with my ability to consume useless facts, meant there was only one solution for it – nurture this passion by buying me a copy of the then recently released *Gran Turismo*. The first time I loaded it up, one particular segment of the intro caught my attention, a bright yellow, second generation Toyota MR2 on full opposite lock. I was hooked from the moment I figured out what the car was. Targa top, pop-up headlights, tiny frame holding it all together – look at how cleanly the rear wing hooks up to the engine bay. It still gets me as feverish now as it did back then.

Toyota managed to shift 140,000 of these – big number, considering the MkII never enjoyed the same reputation for great driving dynamics as the boxier original. Early versions had reputations for savage lift off oversteer, and in 1992, after two years on sale, Toyota revised the front and rear suspension and fitted wider tyres.

Not every flaw was cured, though. The power of this non Turbo GT is just about sufficient, but you'll only really enjoy it once you get past 2,500rpm. The main reason isn't its power delivery, which is strong and linear, but the noise: it sounds like a removal van before fizzing into a more interesting rasp.

The other big issue is the lack of power steering. It's incredibly heavy at low speeds and on the first half rotation of the wheel. You do feel the load lifting and providing some actual response once you're up to speed though, and when it does eventually all come together, the MR2 is a fun car to throw around. There's a small boundary layer in which you can get it to misbehave – I even had a moment after a very ambitious roundabout approach – but for the most part, there are bountiful amounts of grip. It's not a point and squirt machine by any stretch, but there's enough sprightliness in its handling to warrant a smirk.

WORDS: SHAFIQ ABIDIN **PHOTOS:** MARK RICCIONI

“I ASSUMED IT WOULD BE A HUNKERED DOWN, ROWDY SPORTS CAR. I WAS WRONG. IT’S A GENTLE GT”

Pedal to the metal – get past 2,500rpm to enjoy the magnificent rasp

The MR2’s best trait, though, is its ability as a cruiser. When you settle into a long mile munching session, you realise just how soft and cushioned the lumbar supported seats are. You’re positioned squat and low to the ground with your feet way out in the next town, but the ride is brilliant thanks to the tiny 14-inch alloys and thick tyre walls, plus an absorbent suspension setup.

I completely misunderstood the purpose of this car. When I got flashbacks to the 90° opposite lock freeze frame on the crummy old TV in my bedroom, I assumed this would be a hunkered down, rowdy sports car. I was wrong: it’s a gentle GT. My whole life I thought I knew what the MR2 was, but I didn’t. It’s not a car for wolfing down mountain passes, it’s best served as a sunroof open, vintage funk and soul blaring sort of dish to peacefully navigate a long B-road with.

Perhaps this easily misjudged character is why so many people are willing to discard mint examples in favour of chasing fraudulence. But I’m absolutely fine with it. The MR2 was one of those heroes that turned out to be nothing like I’d imagined it would… but in the most pleasant way possible.

DRIVEN

HEAD TO HEAD

SUPER SALOONS

BMW has added electrification to the M5, but it's also added weight. Lots of it. Audi's internally combusted RS7 stands in its way

WORDS OLLIE MARRIAGE **PHOTOGRAPHY** JONNY FLEETWOOD

We've seen it coming from a mile off. No, not the canary yellow, hippo sized BMW M5, which is to Q-car subtlety what Elon Musk is proving to be to international relations. I'm talking about hybrid. It's everywhere now, from crossovers to supercars, electrical assistance boosting power and efficiency. And yet here, in the car segment it's surely most suited to, hybrid has achieved a level of controversy never seen before.

There aren't many better homes for a plug in hybrid system than a super saloon, you'd imagine. They're not supercars, so there's space to package the hardware. You've got a comeback if anyone challenges you for driving a gas guzzling V8, and outrageous figures to brag about among your people. It adds a dimension to the car, improves response by lag filling and costs you less in fuel. The only drawback you can point to is weight, and who cares about that in the thunderous super saloon class?

'No one' must have been BMW's assumption as it gaily rolled out an M5 weighing over half a tonne more than its direct predecessor, and then watched the storm clouds gather. Just as they had earlier when Mercedes announced the C63 was bidding *auf wiedersehen* to the famous V8 and *willkommen* to a 2.0-litre four cylinder with an electric motor.

As we found out in issue 387, Mercedes hasn't got the C63 right – it lost to an Alfa Giulia QV that's as old as Italy itself. We don't know if BMW was planning on downsizing the M5's engine, but it must have been on one of the early whiteboards. Keeping the V8 alive and augmenting it with electricity via a 194bhp e-motor crammed into the gearbox has given the BMW M5 an unprecedented set of numbers. It has over 100bhp and 100lb ft more than its rival here.

Ah yes, the Audi RS7. Powered simply by a petrol engine, which means it's not afflicted by the weight of a 22kWh battery, plus power inverters, motors, cabling and whatever else it is that adds half a tonne of mass. What a corking looking thing this RS7 is on its 22-inch matte grey alloys. Audi understands stance and attitude in a way BMW doesn't. And yet across 40 years of history, this is the first M5 ever to boast new bodywork panels. Up until now all M5s have only benefitted from new bumpers and sills, but this gen has been gifted new metalwork in the guise of bigger wings and arches, swollen to cover track widths increased from the regular 5-Series by 75mm at the front. Couldn't you tell?

It's a missed opportunity, doesn't hunker into the road anything like the RS7. Where the Audi is all shoulder and swagger, the BMW is ungainly of

WHAT ABOUT THESE?

MERCEDES-AMG C63S e-PERFORMANCE

The £100,000 Mercedes C-Class is here. With a four cylinder engine. It's not for us, so it's probably not for you either

£97,530

PORSCHE PANAMERA TURBO E-HYBRID

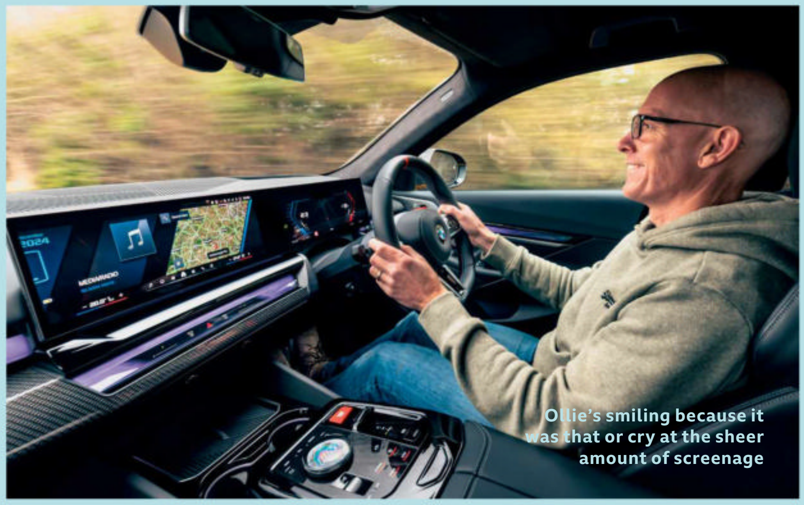
Similar size, weight and specification to the M5, but it costs 35 grand more and 'only' has 671bhp. There's a £170k Turbo S above it, naturally

£145,400

AUDI RS E-TRON GT

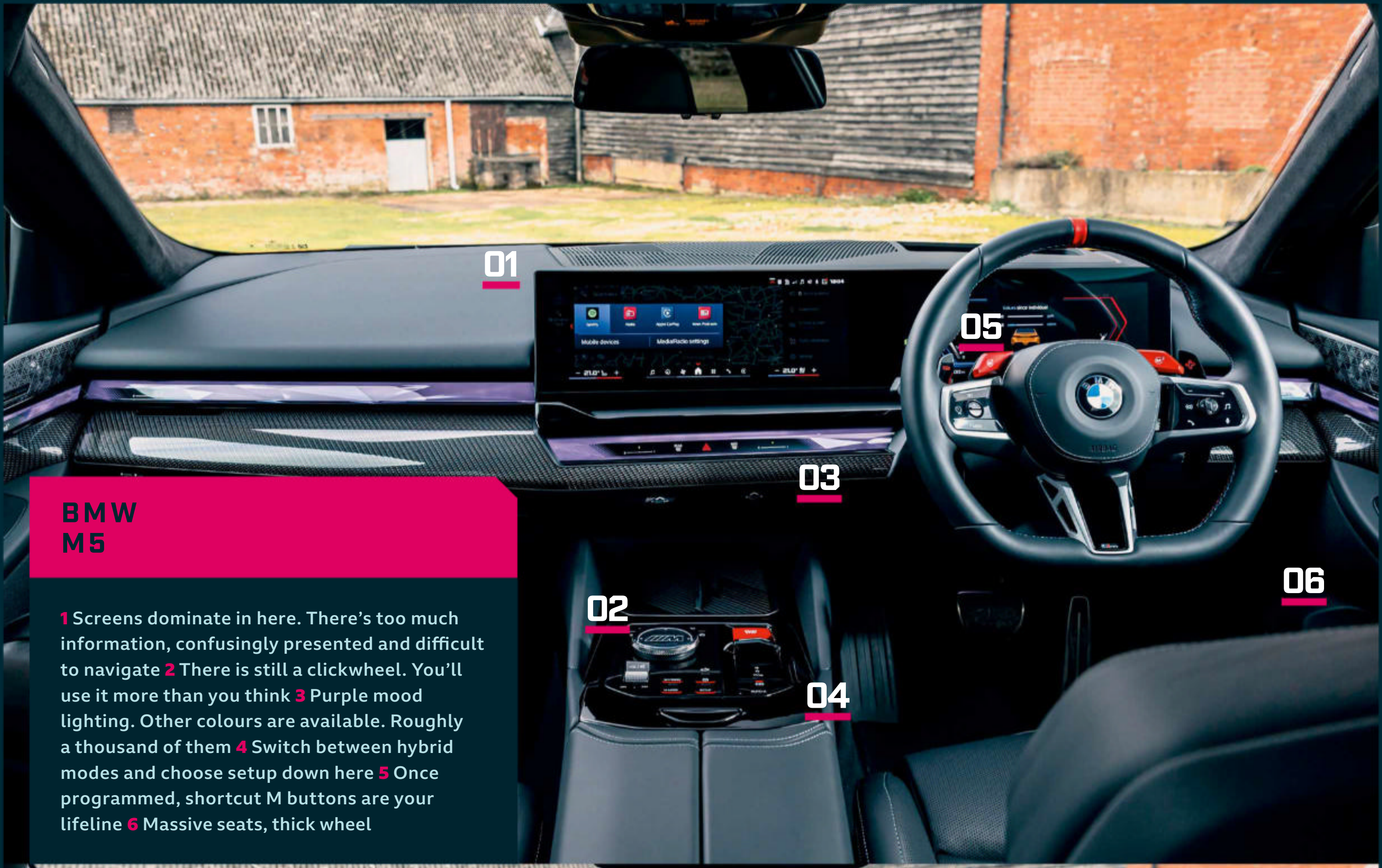
Does electric float your boat? We prefer Audi's 845bhp RS e-tron GT to the Porsche Taycan. Has a 105kWh battery, still lighter than the BMW M5

£127,310



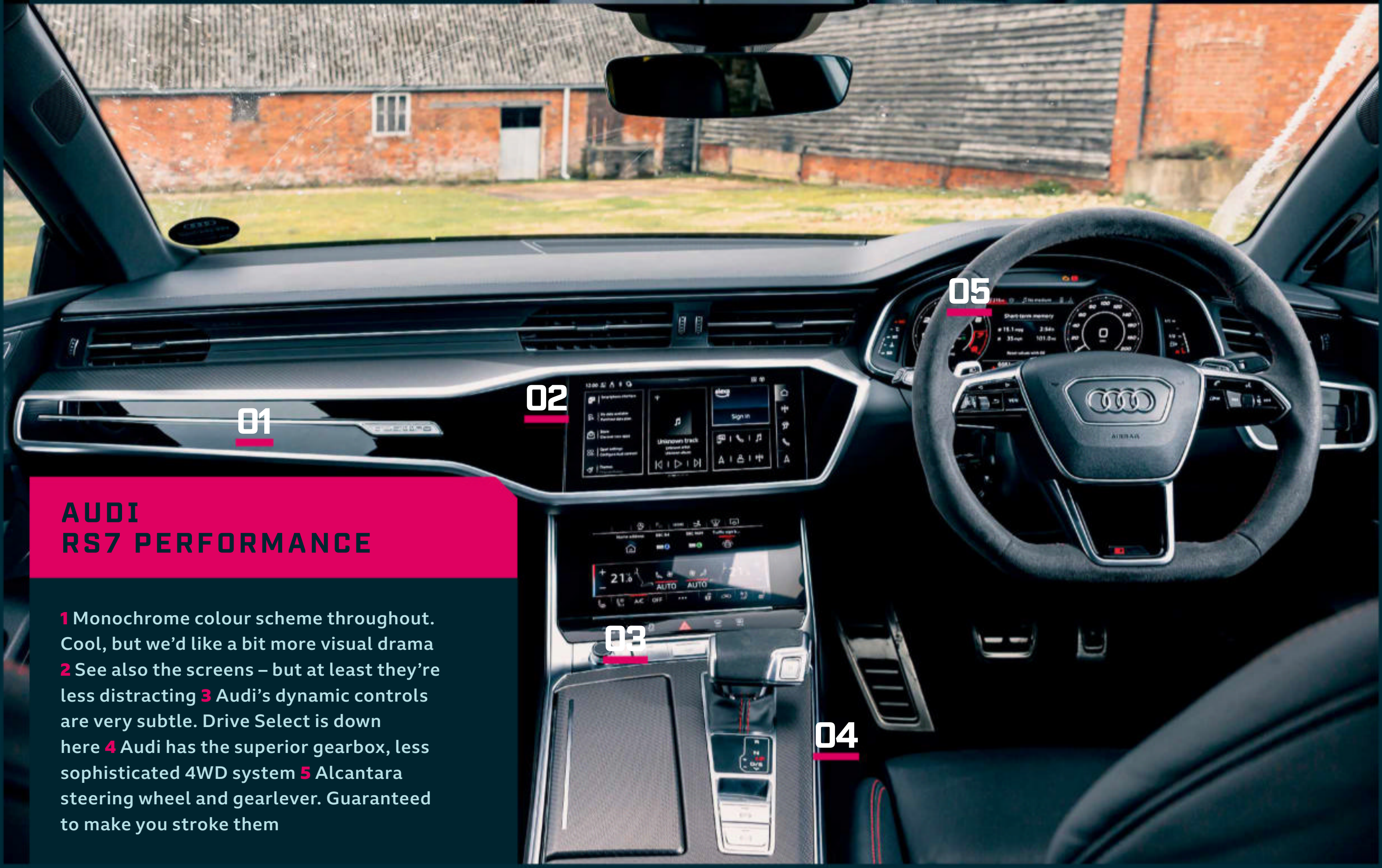
Ollie's smiling because it was that or cry at the sheer amount of screenage

“AUDI UNDERSTANDS STANCE AND ATTITUDE IN A WAY BMW DOESN'T”



BMW M5

1 Screens dominate in here. There's too much information, confusingly presented and difficult to navigate **2** There is still a clickwheel. You'll use it more than you think **3** Purple mood lighting. Other colours are available. Roughly a thousand of them **4** Switch between hybrid modes and choose setup down here **5** Once programmed, shortcut M buttons are your lifeline **6** Massive seats, thick wheel



AUDI RS7 PERFORMANCE

1 Monochrome colour scheme throughout. Cool, but we'd like a bit more visual drama **2** See also the screens – but at least they're less distracting **3** Audi's dynamic controls are very subtle. Drive Select is down here **4** Audi has the superior gearbox, less sophisticated 4WD system **5** Alcantara steering wheel and gearlever. Guaranteed to make you stroke them flank and snout. This is not one of the great M5s, it just looks heavy handed. Which of course makes it the superior Q car. Few would guess what lurks beneath. Unless it's painted Speed Yellow.

Inside the positions are reversed. Here the BMW is the more expressive and overt, with glossy red thumb buttons, shiny speaker grilles and mood lighting. That's fine – an M5 should feel sporting inside, and this does alongside the sleekly monochrome Audi, which has no more than a subtle RS button on the wheel. The issue with the BMW is the sheer scale of it. It's like being eight and clambering into your dad's car – the seat swallows you up, you can barely wrap your hands around the steering wheel. This kidlike feeling lasts until the exact moment you start engaging with the screens, when you instantly fast forward several generations to 'confused grandparent'. The home screen contains 58 apps. How exactly are you meant to operate and navigate them on the move? There's little apparent logic or sense of hierarchy to the layout and even if you do manage to track down the driving modes page, you will only discover yet more baffling choices. It wasn't like this in my day, etc.

The Audi, now five years old and a generational step behind, may not have such jazzy graphics, but at least you can work out what's going on. And BMW, you used to do the world's best dials, could you not have at least figured out a way to present information clearly? The new M5 is a very complicated car to operate. Yes, you can just get in and drive, but to get the most out of it you'll want to understand every aspect of your new car. And that's going to take you a long while.

If you've read anything about the M5 already, I suspect the phrase "disguises its weight well" rings a bell. Because it does. Its suspension control, traction, turn-in grip and response are deeply impressive. On the surface it doesn't drive like a 2,435kg car. So you dig a bit and then realise what's missing: secondary signals. The reason the steering and brakes don't have much feel is that they're so heavily assisted, so what hope is there for information to make it back to the driver? And if it does get out of shape on a slippery road and start to slide, well, you're going to learn a lot about momentum.

But up to that point the M5 has a level of control and capability the Audi, despite being several hundred kilos lighter, can't match. It gets itself down a difficult road with a calmness and capability that's deeply impressive. The rear biased 4WD system is instinctive and communicative, driving the M5 out of corners as cleanly and accurately as it had dived into them.

The Audi lollops along in the BMW's wake like an overenthusiastic and rather distracted Labrador. The steering is springy in your hands which means it's hard to nail an apex, and when you get back on the power the 4WD system biases the front, which torque steers, pulling at the steering and making it even harder to stick to a line. Meanwhile the suspension has more movement and less control – it takes longer to recover its composure, so on bumpy roads progress can be a constant turbulent churn unless you've fully ramped it up in RS mode. Where it's like the dampers have had a Hollywood facelift, so chock full of Botox that nothing moves. Overall it's not as well resolved, doesn't feel as expensively engineered as the BMW.

But, crucially, it knows how to have fun. It might be less competent, looser and more wayward, but with the twin turbo V8 howling beautifully, the wheels scrabbling and you fighting to keep everything pointing the right way, you are not only occupied, but entertained. There's more personality to it, more life and charisma.

You might be thinking that the hybrid setup is the BMW's weakness here. It's not. It's a force

ITS ALL IN THE DETAILS

01

02

03

04

Bowers & Wilkins

05

06

1 Big, useful, easily accessible boot for the RS7 **2** The downshift paddle doubles as boost control – pull and hold for 10secs of max attack acceleration **3** Less weight to deal with means Audi has the superior brakes – for feel as well as power **4** Of course lightweight carbon door mirror covers make all the difference **5** V8 is centre stage, e-motor buried in the gearbox **6** Maximum app overload

SPECIFICATIONS

WINNER

	BMW M5	AUDI RS7 PERFORMANCE	TESTER'S NOTES
PRICE	**£110,500 OTR** [£132,670 as tested]	**£125,570 OTR** [£132,595 as tested]	
POWERTRAIN	**4395cc twin turbo V8 + e-motor**	**3995cc twin turbo V8**	*Audi's rowdy V8 is an addictive thing. M5 is more muted, but electric power brings a new dimension in torque and silent driving*
TRANSMISSION	**8spd auto, AWD**	**8spd auto, AWD**	*A pair of long legged 8spd autos here. Just the thing for munching distance. RS7's gearbox is more responsive with crisper shifts*
TOTAL POWER	**717bhp**	**621bhp**	*BMW's V8 'only' develops 577bhp, with electric contributing the rest. Means BMW has left headroom for more powerful versions*
TOTAL TORQUE	**737lb ft**	**626lb ft**	*BMW delivers the goods here. E-motor contributes 206lb ft instantly while the blowers get up to speed. Imagine the force if it weight 500kg less…*
0–62mph	**3.5secs**	**3.4secs**	*Advantage Audi – power to weight tells us why. It develops 301bhp/tonne, against 295 for the BMW. 0–100mph done in 7.22secs for Audi, the BMW in 7.28*
TOP SPEED	**155mph**	**174mph**	*Is 155mph not enough? Audi does 174mph as standard these days, while if you opt for BMW's M Driver's Package 189mph is possible. Autobahn ahoy!*
CLAIMED ECONOMY, TAILPIPE CO_2	**176.6mpg, 34g/km**	**23.2mpg, 276g/km**	*Genuinely the BMW shocked us here. Provided it had electric on board, it would regularly do 35–40mpg. Even when depleted it was way lighter on fuel than the guzzling RS7*
WEIGHT	**2,435kg**	**2,065kg**	*Sorry BMW but this looks like sloppy engineering to us. A 22.1kWh battery plus single e-motor and ancillaries shouldn't add half a tonne*
BOOTSPACE	**466 litres**	**535 litres**	*Hybrid has eaten into bootspace – the M5's load bay is deep but narrow. Audi's hatchback means it's the more practical of the pair*
VERDICT	*Hybrid has made the M5 a more complex car. While still fast, efficient and crisp to drive, the driving experience is no longer the be all and end all of this car. Not even BMW can disguise half a tonne of extra weight*	*Still want a pure ICE super saloon? Buy one while you can, because we guarantee the next RS7 will go the same way as the M5. It's a more wayward car than the BMW, but drives like it wants to have fun*	
SCORE	**7**	**8**	**/10**

for good, giving the M5 immediate response and a kick of instant torque. You can really feel it, especially if you lock the gearbox in a high gear and catch the engine off boost. The issue is that in keeping a heavy car so tightly controlled, it doesn't have enough room to breath. The M5 charges, but doesn't flow – it has the other Hollywood problem, ratcheted so tight into its costume that it daren't move or something might burst. In short it's too uptight.

Plus the V8 is too muffled. The Audi yelps into life, barks and rumbles, while the BMW is more muted. It's also slower than the RS7. I know it has a huge power and torque advantage, but this is where we need to talk about the weight of this new M5 and the fact it has a worse power to weight ratio – not only than its rival, but than the old M5 as well. This is one of the very few cars which is actually slower than the car it is replacing.

Just don't make the mistake of thinking it's slow. In our tests it did exactly what it claims to do, hitting 60mph in 3.44secs. But the Audi was 0.3secs faster – and the old M5 had been one of the very few saloons to duck under the three second barrier, even if only by 0.01secs. It's only at very high speeds, where aerodynamic drag rather than weight is the chief obstacle to overcome, that the new car clawed its way back into contention. It might not have the low speed urgency we'd like, but as a destroyer of autobahns this new M5 has few peers. That's what it feels like it has been designed to do – crush Germany beneath its heavyweight fist.

BMW claims 43 miles of e-range, but charging is slow

The flipside of that is stopping distances, where you won't be at all surprised to learn that physics wasn't defied, the M5 stopping from 100mph in 91.56 metres, the RS7 in 86.22. Now, the driving experience itself is of far more relevance to us than a set of dry numbers, but those figures are indicative of the situation BMW has got itself into here, adding complexity and subtracting tactility. Yes, it's nice to be able to drive a useful distance on electric (BMW claims 43 miles), but you're never going to stop to charge it up once you realise it only slurps electrons at 7kWh, so transcontinental blasts will be done carrying a lot of surplus hybrid baggage. Still, BMW says that without the comforting support of electricity the M5 will still return 27.7mpg – way better than the RS7's 23.2mpg. In our testing, the BMW returned 28.8mpg overall, the Audi 18.3mpg.

And there's more good news. Considering the technology that's gone into it and the quality of the execution, £110,500 looks conspicuously good value for the BMW. Especially alongside the £125k that Audi charges for the RS7. It gets away with that simply because the RS7 is a good looking motor.

It's also the winner of this comparison because despite the cost disadvantage it's a prettier, simpler, more engaging, charismatic car. If you want a pure internal combustion super saloon this is one of the very few options left. The RS7 is now almost a hangover from a bygone era. Yet if we'd put it up against the old M5, I'm pretty sure it would have lost. Does this mean BMW is on the wrong track with the new car? Not necessarily, but did weight really need to balloon so significantly? More than that, there's a feeling that despite its capabilities, the M5 has changed tack, is now aimed at a slightly less driving focused, more luxury oriented audience. Make no mistake though, for better or worse others will...

> “THE M5 HAS A LEVEL OF CAPABILITY AND CONTROL THE AUDI CAN'T MATCH”

THE OVERRUN

Small but perfectly formed reviews. The best of this month's drives

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HYUNDAI SANTA FE ULTIMATE HYBRID

£50,700

1.6T 4cyl hybrid	212 bhp	9.6 secs	41.5 mpg	155 g/km

LIFE'S HARD ENOUGH, DON'T you want your car to make things easier? The Santa Fe delivers with a seven-seat package that actually seats seven, and a range of hybrid options to suit everyone's needs, based off a workhorse 1.6-litre petrol. There are lots of neat touches, and a few silly ones that you'll show off to your friends once and never use again – like the UV sterilising glovebox, for instance. **SB**

SKODA ELROQ

£33,350

63 kWh	201 bhp	8.0 secs	99 mph	260 miles

SKODA'S NEW COMPACT SUV is all very sensible, following closely in the Enyaq's footsteps and debuting the Czech firm's smart new Modern Solid design language. Here it's available in 50 (55kWh battery/168bhp/230-mile range), 60 (63kWh/201bhp/260 miles), and 85 (82kWh/281bhp/360 miles) flavours – stick to the middle. It's tidy to drive, rides nicely and it's competitively priced too. **PR**

7/10

VAUXHALL FRONTERA ELECTRIC

£23,495

FOR Appealing price, there's a version to suit all

AGAINST Uninspiring cabin, limited electric range

THE NEW FRONTERA SITS BETWEEN THE GRANDLAND AND MOKKA, shares roughly the same footprint as an Astra hatchback, and is available with electric or mild hybrid powertrains. But the big story here is both cost exactly the same, with Vauxhall committed to reducing the price disparity that exists with EVs. How? It sits on Stellantis' Smart Car platform, which it shares with the Citroen C3, plus upcoming C3 Aircross and Fiat Grande Panda (more will follow), helping to keep costs down. It feels a pretty solid effort too, if the cabin is a little cheap and the EV only offers limited range. But if electric works for you – ie you don't travel hundreds of miles a day and you can take advantage of cheap home charging tariffs – the electric variant is the Frontera to buy. It's better to drive, and it'll cost you less over the long run. **PR**

44 kWh	111 bhp	12.1 secs	87 mph	186 miles

7/10

HYUNDAI TUCSON PREMIUM HYBRID

£38,490

FACELIFT TIME FOR HYUNDAI'S mid-sized SUV, and the Korean carmaker hasn't been tempted to tone it down any. Most of the updates are inside, with the dash sprouting twin 12.3in screens. Looks good. It's not the most dynamic car in its class, but it's not far off – and how much does that factor in anyway? Hyundai has proven it can mash style and practicality into a solid everyday family package. **SB**

1.6T 4cyl hybrid	212 bhp	8.2 secs	49.6 mpg	129 g/km

7/10

MERCEDES SL63 SE PERFORMANCE

£190,845

THE SL55 HAS A 577BHP TWIN turbo V8. That is ENOUGH. But not for AMG, which has stuffed in a nine-mile range battery and electric motor. The result? Barely enough bootspace for the pointless charging cables. A 2.1-tonne kerbweight. And – at last – the madness we love of AMG. 'Enough' power to spin all four tyres in third gear. Preposterous, but also strangely magnificent. **OK**

4.0TT V8 + e-motor	805 bhp	2.9 secs	36.7 mpg	180 g/km

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LB74 OYM

8/10

KIA EV3

£32,995

FOR Aggressively priced for the amount of space, kit and range

AGAINST Stop bonging. Stop bonging please. Argh! Shut UP!

		0–62 mph	vmax	
58 kWh	201 bhp	7.7 secs	105 mph	270 miles

IF YOU KNOW THE LONG-BOI EV6, SHARP suited Niro EV and remember the Soul EV, you might wonder where Kia has found space to cram another electro-not-quite-SUV into its lineup.

Well, it's the smallest of the EV family, priced from £32,995. Slap bang in the middle of VW Golf territory: the UK market yardstick for a normcore car. There will in time be EV4s and EV5s.

Back to the EV3 though, which smears a dash of the gargantuan EV9's square jawed moon buggy aesthetic onto a car about the same size as the Ford Explorer or Volvo EX30.

Thanks to some odd oblong festooned alloy wheel choices and chunky wheelarches it manages to look distinctive and futuristic but doesn't resort to fake grilles and gimmicks. You'll probably still have to explain the 'K backwards N' logo though.

Kia's aiming not just to press home its advantage against beleaguered mainstream European brands but also stay ahead of the incoming Chinese upstarts. That was Kia and Hyundai once.

So: long story short, you pay from £32,995 for the smaller battery single motor version and up to £43,895 for a range topper. All EV3s are – for the time being – front-wheel drive only, with a single 201bhp motor providing the silent oomph.

Monthly payments for this entry level 'Air' trim will scoot under the £400 a month barrier, while even a toppy model is unlikely to pass £500 a month according to Kia's finance calculator, at the time of writing. We'd stick with the base spec, which has enough of what you need. Range. Toys. The usual.

The standard range battery offers 58kWh of capacity and a 270-mile range. Reckon on 210–230 in reality, and better efficiency than the heavier bigger battery.

On the road, it's comfy, if a bit lumpen of ride, but has that sense of rufty crossover tuftiness that makes people pick, say, a Juke over a Micra.

Take a moment to appreciate the consistent weighted steering, the sensibly calibrated pedals that don't waste e-torque as wheelspin or create an onboard moshpit when braking, and never think about any of the controls again.

Kia has gamely attempted to liven things up with a drive mode button on the steering wheel, but the main effect it has on your experience is to redecorate the instrument screen and ambient strip lighting. Although, the frictionless coasting function apparent in Eco mode is useful for eking out maximum efficiency. So, keep it in green.

We have two bugbears here, and neither of them are to do with the EV3 being an EV. The first is fiddly touchscreen menus, and that relates to the second problem: overattentive driver alerts. The EV3 says you're drowsy when you're wide awake. It tries to steer you back into a lane you're not veering out of. The tech needs to calm down – because delving into the sub-subbity-submenu to quell it is a faff. **OK**

MERCEDES-BENZ E450d

£88,995

3.0TD 6cyl	367 bhp	5.0 secs	42.8 mpg	171 g/km

THE 450d'S BIG AWD DIESEL POWERTRAIN shoves you forward with secure and feather wrapped brutality, and the cabin has all the space and amenities for humans. Aft of the back seat is a chasm that serves as box room or kennel. It'll tow brilliantly too. Without a trailer you're looking at a real 40mpg. So yeah it's useful. But it also has attractions to help justify the astronomical price. Its low slung build means a superb wide handling stretch, and it's delightfully refined. **PH**

VOLVO EX90 PERFORMANCE

£100,555

107 kWh	408 bhp	4.9 secs	112 mph	374 miles

THE MOST DESIRABLE AND BEST EXECUTED electric family SUV yet. Trouble is it costs over £100,000. And the waiting list is currently about eight months long. Don't expect cheaper versions to turn up while initial demand is so strong. If you must join the Twin Motor queue, save yourself £4,300 by foregoing the Performance version. It's not what this car is about. The EX90's strengths – smooth driving, superb packaging, thoughtful interior design – ensure you'll love it anyway. **OM**

FORD MUSTANG

£55,725

FOR It's still a V8, cabin fit and finish an improvement on old

AGAINST Tech heavy interior, annoying safety systems

5.0 V8	440 bhp	5.3 secs	23.5 mpg	274 g/km

MORE THAN 10 MILLION MUSTANGS HAVE been sold since it galloped onto the scene in 1964. And despite the demise of the Mondeo, Fiesta and soon the Focus, the Mustang soldiers on, now in seventh gen guise.

And that's a Very Good Thing indeed. There's little cosmetic change compared to its predecessor, and as before it's available as a two-door coupe or convertible, while the formula is still big engine up front and all the power sent to the back wheels. On our shores it's 5.0-litre V8 or nothing, with the 2.3-litre 4cyl turbo Ecoboost no longer sold here.

There are two versions: first up is the GT, which produces 440bhp and 398lb ft of torque. Then there's the Dark Horse, which boosts power to 447bhp, and gets a Tremec gearbox, limited slip diff and Magneride suspension.

We've been spending time in the GT, and the good news is that V8 remains as brutish as ever. It also gets a bag of party tricks, including a drift handbrake and a rev matching mode. But on a twisty road it remains far from the keenest handling car to drive, heavy and lacking the precision of a dedicated sports car. You get the sense Ford understands its limitations, so rather than fight a losing battle it's leant into the slow in, fast out V8 muscle car vibe.

The cabin however has had a much bigger overhaul: the fit and finish is a big step up and it now gets a fancy dual screen setup complete with 12.4in instrument and 13.2in infotainment displays. Tech galore, but Ford has rather thoughtfully included Classic '67-'68, Fox Body '87-'93 and SVT Cobra '99-'01 themes on the driver's display with lovely retro graphics.

Unsurprisingly, such heavy use of screenage has led to the demise of most of the physical switchgear including climate controls. This is a muscle car, so involvement matters, but by digitising so much the sense of connection has suffered. And that's what made it great before.

But the fact that the Ford Mustang still exists is a reason to celebrate, even if this new one doesn't drastically move the game on. The Mustang's unique place in the European sphere has allowed it to coast merrily along, completely unbothered by whatever strides anything else is making. And it's likely you'll be too enamoured with that V8 to care. **PR**

GARAGE

INCLUDING

FORD RANGER RAPTOR · DACIA DUSTER · PEUGEOT 3008 · GENESIS GV60 · SKODA KODIAQ · RICCI'S GARAGE · BMW i5 · TESLA MODEL 3 · INEOS GRENADIER · PROJECT CORNER: BMW E30

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PHOTOGRAPHY: ROCCO BOVINGDON

GOODBYE

FORD RANGER RAPTOR

£62,479 OTR/£65,359 as tested/£785 pcm

WHY IT'S HERE:

Can a jump hungry, extreme pickup double as useful family transport?

DRIVER: JETHRO BOVINGDON

LAST WEEK THE RAPTOR demonstrated its breadth of appeal perfectly. A rickety old shed had been slowly collapsing in my back garden for some while and after months of procrastination it felt like time. So I kicked it over, pulled it to pieces and threw it in the Raptor's bed before heading to the recycling centre.

The next day I headed to Wales to some of the very best roads in the world. My eldest son has started A-level photography and with a new camera to play with we were in need of a quiet location and some cool scenery. For me it was the ideal excuse to fully extend the Raptor and a chance to visit the roads I love so much.

The weather was freezing cold, Rocco managed to go thigh deep in a muddy bog before lunchtime, but overall it was a successful day. The Raptor is no sports car and doesn't even attempt to give that locked down feel of a 'performance SUV', but with its soft suspension, long wheelbase and gargly turbocharged V6, it's really enjoyable to hustle along.

I've been trying to understand quite why the Raptor has become such a loved part of the household and have decided it's simply the honesty of the thing. From the rubber floor mats and obvious functionality to the old school, thirsty engine and the wonderfully soft, progressive dynamics, the big Ford blends modern convenience with a kind of throwback simplicity. Despite the fact it's not especially fast or grippy, I really love driving it.

In Wales on those gorgeous roads the Raptor is like a giant Ariel Nomad – expressive, exuberant, prone to big gestures, but always indulgent and easy to handle. Most of all it makes you think. There are no clever active anti-roll bars, the power delivery is pretty linear but the sheer scale of the thing means you have to keep the engine wound up to make good progress and everything is about maintaining momentum and, occasionally, managing the slip of those massive BF Goodrich tyres.

On the way home, it was a breeze, of course. The heated seats are spectacular, the ride has that separate chassis patter but it's not jarring and doesn't shudder like an old Defender, and it's so reassuring through wet, freezing conditions. I wouldn't go as far as to say the Raptor is a great one car solution, and I do miss the agility and response of a conventional performance car, but it's very rare I pine for something with a posher interior and 'sporty' setup.

Sadly, my time with the Raptor is now over – life is about to get a lot more mundane. Oh yes, the practical stuff: nothing broke, a litre of oil was consumed, my outgoings skyrocketed thanks to all the fuel stops and tyre wear was minimal. I knew all those jumps over the local canal bridges would pay dividends somehow.

SPECS

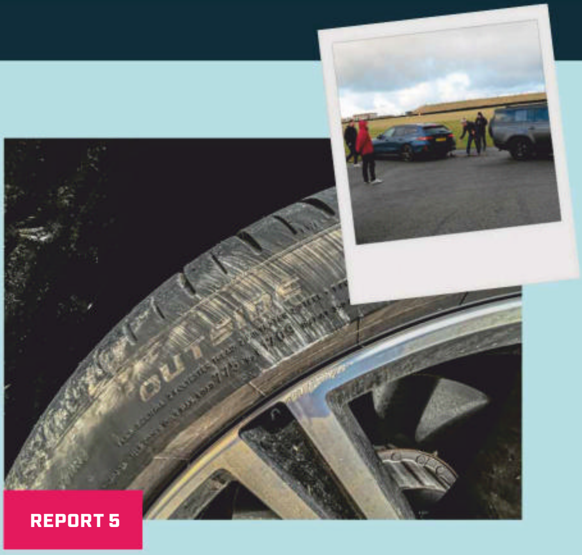
POWERTRAIN: 2956cc twin-turbo V6 petrol, 4WD

PERFORMANCE: 289bhp, 362lb ft, 0–62mph in 7.9secs, 111mph

KERBWEIGHT: 2,454kg

ECONOMY: 20.5mpg, 315g/km CO_2

MILES SO FAR 6,329 OUR MPG 19.5



REPORT 5

BMW i5 TOURING

£79,355 OTR/£93,395 as tested/£1,274 pcm

WHY IT'S HERE: Is an XXL dad wagon still a versatility king when it's electric?

DRIVER: ANDY FRANKLIN

ACCORDING TO THE RAC, ITS PATROLS ATTENDED 22,703 pothole related breakdowns in 2024, due to the UK suffering from an epidemic of an estimated one million potholes. And that's just on my school run.

You might wonder how someone damages their car when the potholes are clearly there to be seen? Driving home from a New Year celebration, it was wet and dark. I saw the small puddle and thought nothing of it. Hitting it should have only made a small splash... sadly, hidden underneath was a huge pothole.

There was an almighty bang and the car lurched. You can see in the picture where the wheel dropped in. I was convinced one of my £800 20in M Star Spoke BiColour Jet Black alloy wheels (that I'd been protecting with my life) was ruined.

Luckily, depending on how you see it, it was only a minor chip, which is repairable but hugely frustrating, and I was extremely lucky to get away with not blowing the tyre into tiny shreds of rubber. Perhaps we're wasting our time speccing expensive wheels when the pothole statistics are so against us? Problem is they look too good...

In fact, the i5 hasn't had a very lucky start to the year. Thinking it was all wheel drive, *TG*'s Rowan Horncastle managed to get the i5 stuck on some wet grass in deepest Wales. Engaging the reduced power mode that's supposed to ease getaways on slippery surfaces was useless, so it needed a tow from Jack Rix's V8 Defender. About time one of those mahoosive 4x4s came in handy.

SPECS

POWERTRAIN: single electric motor, 81.2kWh battery, RWD

PERFORMANCE: 335bhp, 295lb ft, 0–62mph in 6.1secs, 120mph

KERBWEIGHT: 2,255kg

ECONOMY: 3.5mpkWh, 327 miles

MILES SO FAR 9,995 OUR MPKWH 3.1

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REPORT 3

CUPRA BORN

£44,625 OTR/£46,697 as tested/£442 pcm

WHY IT'S HERE:
Can this livened up EV prove that electric hot hatches are worth a go?
DRIVER: GREG POTTS

UP UNTIL NOW I HAVEN'T REALLY driven the VZ as a hot hatch should be driven. It's hardly the car's fault – my lack of home charging and the subsequent constant range anxiety means that I'm often unwilling to trade efficiency for a little bit of fun.

And yet, stick the Born VZ into its sportiest 'Cupra' drive mode and it's really quite impressive. The suspension immediately tightens up and the body is controlled well through bends, but the ride avoids being too crashy and there's actually decent steering feel. Helps when the rear wheels are doing the driving, of course. The 'Sport' setting for the traction control means you can use a prod of the throttle to quell any understeer through corners, and it'll let the car move about a bit underneath you, although grip is plentiful most of the time.

It's great to have paddles that adjust the regen, but why couldn't Cupra go the whole hog and add in a setting that uses those paddles for a fake DCT gearbox? Hyundai has proved with the Ioniq 5 N that that's one of the quickfire routes to driver engagement. A bit more involvement would be a big improvement.

SPECS

POWERTRAIN: single electric motor, 79kWh battery, RWD
PERFORMANCE: 322bhp, 402lb ft, 0–62mph in 5.6secs, 124mph
KERBWEIGHT: 1,999kg
ECONOMY: 4.1mpkWh, 366 miles

MILES SO FAR 1,580 **OUR MPKWH** 3.3

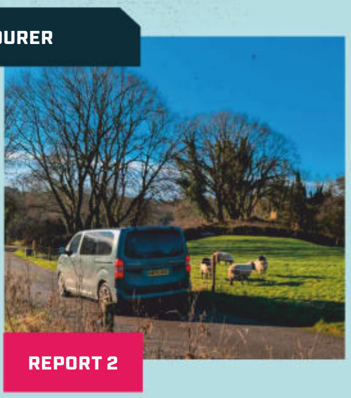
CITROEN e-SPACETOURER

Has someone parked a regular distance from your rear bumper? Yeah, you're not getting in the boot...

... unless you use the hinge-up rear window. Neat idea... apart from the three foot drop to the boot floor below

Further impracticality: despite the vast dash area, this is the only spot for the driver's coffee. Suboptimal

This isn't the door to the charging socket (that's at the front). This flap doesn't open. Call it an ICE hangover



REPORT 2

CITROEN e-SPACETOURER

£54,375/£56,960/£469

WHY IT'S HERE:
Is a giant battery powered MPV really a good idea?
DRIVER: SAM PHILIP

IN MOST REGARDS, THE e-SpaceTourer is a deeply practical van/car. On a Christmas roadtrip to the southwest, it swallows pretty much the entire extended family and all their possessions with ease.

But, in a couple of small regards, it's also weirdly impractical. Chief frustration is that tailgate, which, because it's top hinging, requires you to park, ooh, a solid six feet from any obstacle behind if you wish to access the boot. Side hinging barn doors would be far more convenient.

I assumed this was because Citroen's Dispatch van – upon which the e-SpaceTourer is based – had a top hinge tailgate, and the cost of changing it proved simply too prohibitive. But here's the really weird thing. The Dispatch van *does* have side hinging barn doors. What's going on, Citroen?

SPECS

POWERTRAIN: single electric motor, 75kWh battery, FWD
PERFORMANCE: 134bhp, 221lb ft, 0–62mph in 13.1 secs, 81mph
KERBWEIGHT: 2,136kg
ECONOMY: 3.2mpkWh, 221 miles

MILES SO FAR 790 **OUR MPKWH** 2.0

HELLO

“Is a hybrid Duster still a budget hero?”

DACIA DUSTER

£25,945 OTR/£26,595 as tested/£128 pcm

WHY IT’S HERE: The Duster now looks funky and has gone hybrid: still a budget hero?

DRIVER: *CHARLIE ROSE*

WHILE *TG* HAS A LONG STANDING love affair with fast cars, we also know how to give credit where it’s due when it comes to value and practicality. Enter the new Dacia Duster, the latest addition to the garage and none other than the winner of *TopGear*’s All The Car You’ll Ever Need award in 2024.

This particular example, finished in Sandstone (£650) is the full hybrid version in Journey trim. It promises a mix of efficiency, practicality and some clever features we’ll be exploring over the coming months.

Under the bonnet, our Duster features a 1.6-litre petrol engine paired with two electric motors, delivering a total of 140bhp. The system allows for short bursts of electric only driving at speeds of up to 30mph. But it’s worth noting you currently can’t opt for 4WD on the full hybrid. If off roading is on the cards, you’ll have to go for the bifuel or mild hybrid version.

Dacia claims 56.5mpg for the full hybrid, but I’ve been seeing closer to 49mpg so far. That said, I have a habit of gamifying the regen system to set some high scores, so I expect that number to creep up as I get more competitive with myself.

The Duster is proving itself to be as capable as you’d expect from an affordable SUV, but the real fun is yet to come… when I get hold of Dacia’s accessory catalogue.

SPECS

POWERTRAIN: 1598cc 4cyl, FWD
PERFORMANCE: 139bhp, 109lb ft, 0–62mph in 9.8secs, 106mph
KERBWEIGHT: 1,380kg
ECONOMY: 56.5mpg, 114g/km CO_2

MILES SO FAR 1,972 **OUR MPG** 49.0

REPORT 2

PEUGEOT 3008

£38,535/£39,135/£360

WHY IT’S HERE:
Is the striking looking Peugeot 3008 a style-over-substance crossover?

DRIVER: *ESTHER NEVE*

LET’S TALK SPEC. THE NEW 3008 looking fabulous in the photo above is a top spec GT… which means it gets the entirety of everything lavished upon it. All features that the lower spec Allure has, the GT receives, and on top of that it has – deep breath – adaptive cruise with stop/go, parking sensors, a leather steering wheel, smart tailgate, fancy black roof and rear spoiler, LED lights front and rear, aluminium dash, heated Alcantara front seats, stainless steel door trims and… luxury carpet mats – oooooh. There are other froufrous but, frankly, this is enough for us to get our heads around for one session.

On the road, a GT spec Hybrid 3008 costs £38,535. The only extra on this car is the 360° Vision & Drive Assist Pack costing £600. And frankly that’s all you need. Job done.

SPECS

POWERTRAIN: 1199cc 3cyl, FWD
PERFORMANCE: 138bhp, 170lb ft, 0–62mph in 10.2secs, 125mph
KERBWEIGHT: 1,573kg
ECONOMY: 44.6mpg, 124g/km CO_2

MILES SO FAR 4,300 **OUR MPG** 47.9

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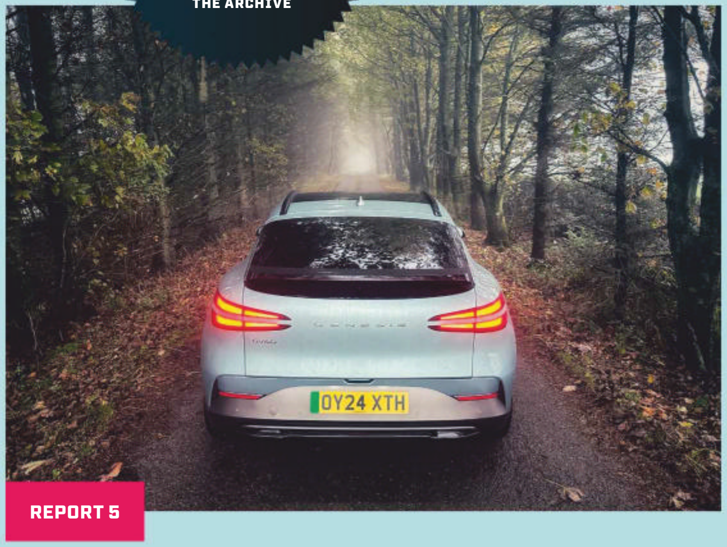

REPORT 5

GENESIS GV60

£66,900 OTR/£74,855 as tested/£985 pcm
WHY IT'S HERE: Time to see if Genesis' only bespoke EV cuts the electric mustard
DRIVER: *Tom Ford*

IT'S THE SEASONAL DEPRESSION that every electric car driver fears. As the ambient temperatures have wobbled ever downwards, so has the GV60's efficiency. It happens to all EVs, but we've gone from an easy 3.2mpkWh to 2.5/2.6, and a range of around 200 all in, maybe a bit more if you switch off the greedy aircon completely and drive like the throttle pedal has a rusty nail poking out of it. Still, I have to say that the GV60 is absolutely solid in bad weather; stable and confident, it's got on point traction management systems that work very well. Interestingly, it feels rear biased if you poke at the throttle midway around a wet roundabout, but the way the traction control clips and manages the potential wayward movement is impressive. Ditto when you hit standing water on one side of the road, something that happens a lot where I live. Weird advantage in snow though: you can slow down very smoothly using the brake regen rather than the friction brakes – it all makes for much more graceful movements.

Other than that, I've also got rusty rear discs. Actually quite common on EVs where the drivers use more regen than not, and solved quickly by just doing a hefty stop a couple of times to make sure things get engaged.

SPECS

POWERTRAIN: dual electric motors, 77kWh battery, AWD
PERFORMANCE: 483bhp, 516lb ft, 0–62mph in 4.1secs, 146mph
KERBWEIGHT: 2,145kg
ECONOMY: 3.2mpkWh, 289 miles

MILES SO FAR 10,522 **OUR MPKWH** 2.6

REPORT 4

LR DEFENDER 130

£115,435 OTR/£117,375 as tested/£1,784 pcm
WHY IT'S HERE: Is the biggest Defender the best?
DRIVER: *Jack Rix*

THE 130 HAS BEEN ON AN OFF ROAD ADVENTURE. Unfortunately, I wasn't in the country so it was left in the hands of Ollie Marriage (outdoor enthusiast, default expedition leader) and Harry Rudd (videographer, tasked with driving it from Sussex to Strata Florida in Wales and bringing it back unscathed). Things didn't go to plan.

Mr Marriage first. "Quite funny to see a fountain gushing up from a Welsh bog. That's what happens when you puncture a tyre underwater. It takes me a second to work out what's going on. And a further second to realise I'm seeing double. Yep, the same rock slices the sidewalls of both nearside tyres. Swear words happen."

Mr Rudd? "We were rock crawling when it happened. We discovered we'd been on the rim for about 50m. We fixed that one, then 15 minutes later I see a jet of water rocket up past the window. I had punctured both the front left and back left tyre in one hit. Land Rover made very quick work on the fix the following day, arriving in another Defender armed with a full set of spares."

A few takeaways: Ollie seemed to forget about the first puncture, or perhaps he was trying to sugarcoat it? And if your aim is to lacerate as many tyres as possible at once, Harry's your man. Finally, if you're going to take your Defender off road make sure it's on the right rubber... and you've got spares.

SPECS

POWERTRAIN: 5,000cc supercharged V8, AWD
PERFORMANCE: 493bhp, 450lb ft, 0–62mph in 5.4secs, 149mph
KERBWEIGHT: 2,670kg
ECONOMY: 19.6mpg, 325g/km CO_2

MILES SO FAR 3,730 **OUR MPG** 19.7

Ricci's GARAGE

REPORT 55

THIS MONTH: MARK KINDLY TAKES IN A COUPLE OF *TOPGEAR* TELLY WAIFS AND STRAYS...

There was outrage on Twitter at the end of 2024, not because its owner (who purchased the platform to remove political bias and embrace free speech) decided to go ahead and do the exact opposite from his own account, but because the National Motor Museum, Beaulieu, decided to remove its *World Of TopGear* exhibition triggering speculation as to what would happen to all of the star cars.

"I had no idea there was even an exhibition there!" gasped one Twitter user, which is understandable considering it's only been at the museum for the past... oooooh... 15 years. "This wouldn't have happened if the original three were still there," bemoaned yet another. Random.

Resident pain enthusiast and Land Rover Defender owner, Simon Bond, was tasked with finding homes for the various cars being removed from Beaulieu's display. Given how long the exhibition has existed – since 2009 in fact – the bulk of the cars here have laid dormant in addition to being completely trashed or rotten during their various TV tasks. A few of the more recent gems showed (some) signs of life, but what kind of idiot would want to take on a used and abused TV car without actually seeing what condition they're in before?

As Taylor Swift once said, "It's me. Hi, I'm the problem, it's me." So when an enthused Simon Bond called offering a W140 Merc (with the V12) and a 106 Rallye, this was music to my ears. You'll recognise both of these, the 600SEL Benz being skillfully drifted by a certain Chris Harris in episode 4 of Series 26, and the 106 Rallye making its way through Namibia in the 2019 Christmas special with Paddy behind the wheel. Bring on the excitement.

This excitement was somewhat quashed upon their arrival. Just like every ambitious *TopGear* special in the past, an immediate sense of dread was fairly apparent – and this wasn't even crossing a remote part of the world or enduring hours of racing. This was just trying to get them off the low loader and into my unit. The Mercedes just about fired up, but the suspension had collapsed and its lack of any seats made it all the more difficult to try to manoeuvre. But this was still luxury compared to the 106.

No keys, smashed windows, flat tyres, steering lock on and every panel bent. Just as it finished in Namibia... albeit a bit worse. Thankfully, farmer Peter had popped over wondering what on earth I was up to, and so he immediately fired up his forklift (complete with an impressive amount of wheel palming) to put the 106 neatly in the unit for an indefinite amount of time.

This is, then, a perfect example of why it's often better to encourage others to 'save' a car using social media... rather than actually undertaking the work yourself. If these were animals, there would be no animal shelter capable of housing them. But I'm adamant this won't be the end of the road for either of these cars just yet. I just hope petrol is still being pumped by the time they're both roadworthy again.

Renowned photographer Mark has been working with TopGear *for many, many years. When not taking photos he's buying inappropriate cars. Here he shares his addiction with the world*

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REPORT 5

AUDI RS7 PERFORMANCE

£116,200 OTR/£122,250 as tested/£1,490 pcm

WHY IT'S HERE: Why is our new Audi RS7 Performance such a hit with the public?

DRIVER: *ROWAN HORNCASTLE*

YOU MAY HAVE HEARD OF THE North Coast 500 – the epic 500 mile self drive loop that lassos the stunning coastal scenery of the Scottish Highlands. But Yorkshire wants to bring the smoke to Scotland. With the help of the same mastermind behind the NC500, its tourist board has stitched together its own scenic tapestry and called it Route YC (short for Yorkshire Coast).

Unlike the NC500 which struts its stuff as one continuous loop, Route YC is more of a spider's web – a 250 mile network of overlapping concentric circuits that stretch from Withernsea, which clings to the county's southern hem and the Humber, all the way to Whitby.

To see if it lives up to its billing, I headed north for a winter recce. Having made our way up the A1 and crossed the Humber bridge, we arrived in Scarborough to the sounds of slot machines cashing out and the smell of freshly fried doughnuts.

For our first two days, we set up camp at the Bike & Boot hotel. This funky terraced hotel is the perfect accommodation for tired dogs, walkers, bikers and surfers – all of whom can enjoy Route YC.

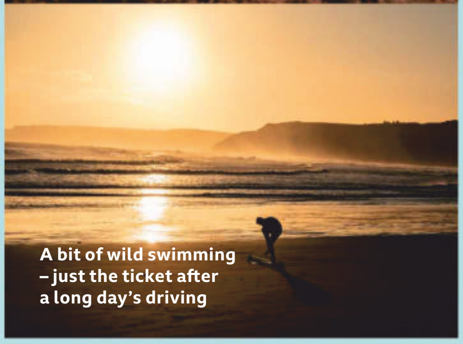
I wake the next morning to the joys of frozen frameless doors. But this minor inconvenience is a sideshow compared to the ultra high performance Continental SportContact 7 tyres. On dry, warm tarmac, they're glorious. But in heavy rain, they develop an alarming affinity for aquaplaning. When it drops below freezing, it's another ballgame.

Still, undeterred, my wife and I set off to tackle the first of many possible loops, winding through the North Riding Forest. The scenery is sublime, but the Contis are out of their depth on snow and ice. The RS7, however, isn't. With ESC, TC, quattro, and ABS, the two tonne super saloon somehow holds its line, while 620bhp does its best to find some traction to the gritted tarmac.

The following day, we head north towards Robin Hood's Bay. The Route YC favours the flowing, faster roads as we carve through the countryside. The RS7's firm ride struggles to settle on the broken roads, but it's the steering that really grates. Each corner requires a second stab at the turn in, as the changeable rack and four wheel steer system mean identical inputs yield wildly different results.

We spend the night at The Stables, a former 17th century farmhouse that wears its history lightly. Its charming courtyard looks out over a cascading view of the moors on one side and Whitby on the other.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT ROUTEYC.CO.UK
THANKS TO INNCOLLECTIONGROUP.COM/THE-STABLES-WHITBY
AND BIKEANDBOOT.COM/SCARBOROUGH



A bit of wild swimming – just the ticket after a long day's driving

Our final day begins at Runswick Bay, but not before the RS7 guzzles yet another five litres of screenwash. Unsurprisingly, a 4.0-litre V8 makes for thirsty work as I've averaged 20.9mpg over 8,000 miles.

We then go rogue, heading west into the North York Moors. It's a place of wild, brooding beauty, where the roads twist and the landscape grows in scale. Dipping south at Castleton, we pick up Blakey Ridge, a ribbon of road that seems purpose built for the RS7. Descending the other side, we roll into Hutton-le-Hole, before rejoining the Route YC and making our way to the world famous Magpie Cafe in Whitby for some grade A fish and chips.

The brilliance of the Route YC is its elasticity. It can be as short or as sprawling as you like, tailored to whatever you like via its interactive online map. It's a 'choose your own adventure' of great food, captivating activities, history, great roads and scenery.

As for the RS7? It's the perfect winter weapon. Comfortable, characterful and toasty, thanks to its heated Alcantara wheel and stitched leather seats. It devours the motorway with serene composure yet comes alive when the roads demand it.

SPECS

POWERTRAIN: 3996cc TT V8, AWD
PERFORMANCE: 621bhp, 627lb ft, 0–62mph in 3.4secs, 174mph
KERBWEIGHT: 2,065kg
ECONOMY: 22.6mpg, 283g/km CO_2

MILES SO FAR 8,183 **OUR MPG** 20.9

Welcome to Arnold Clark Penrith
QUALITY CONTROL
W436 LSG

LOVED AND LOST

CARS WE ONCE OWNED THAT STOLE OUR HEARTS FOREVER

NISSAN MICRA

WRITTEN BY: *JOE HOLDING*

Hello little Micra,

I make it 14 years since mum traded you in. Looking back, our relationship was … toxic. Categorically, irredeemably toxic. You were noisy at any and indeed every speed, unsupportive – could those seats be any flatter? – and the literal opposite of a sight for sore eyes. Heck knows what Grandpa saw in you.

And yet… you tried your hardest. Every football match, you got me there. Every missed school bus, you saved my skin. Every 400-mile trek to see Granny, you made it. Somehow. Even that time a blizzard shut the A55. I am forever grateful.

I know I hurt you too. Filling your door-pulls with chewed-off nail cuttings is a particular regret. I do hope you can forgive teenage me. Lord knows mum hasn't.

Yours,

Joseph

P.S. Are my shinpads in your boot? Keep them – something to remember me by x

WHAT ELSE WE'RE RUNNING

REPORT 6

MINI COOPER S

After six months I'm ready to pass fair judgement on the touchscreen saucer the Mini depends on for almost all interior interactions. The full report is on *TopGear*.com, but in short: not punchably awful, but forces me to breathe in poisonous fumes on a regular basis. C+, could do better. *OK*

REPORT 4

VAUXHALL ASTRA GSe

An annoying rattle has developed in the driver's door. Or at least I think it's in the driver's door. Could be further down below. Elsewhere, I'd noticed that the wheelnut caps were starting to corrode – see the pic – but after the GSE's recent service, those have been swapped out. Though it's now missing one. D'oh. *VP*

REPORT 3

VOLKSWAGEN ID.7 TOURER

With the mercury hovering little higher than 0°C, it's certainly taken a toll on the regular ID.7's range and efficiency. VW claims 383 miles WLTP fully charged, but the best I've seen since the car arrived was 320. It's been steadily dropping since then and after a full charge the range is currently… 243 miles. *JB*

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REPORT 7

INEOS GRENADIER

£76,140 OTR/£79,481 as tested/£1,141 pcm

WHY IT'S HERE: Does a utilitarian off-roader work as a lifestyle vehicle?

DRIVER: *OLLIE MARRIAGE*

IT'S CALLED THE GRENADIER BY LeTech, and right now my plain normal Grenadier is dead to me. All I want is this daft, trans-Icelandic thing on its silly big wheels with a silly big row of orange spotlights. I spend an afternoon churning about in the mud and hoot like a hyena the whole time. Short of nosing it up against a tree, it's essentially unstoppable.

LeTech is a German modifier of off-roaders. It famously created the $G4\times4^2$ for Mercedes and has now partnered with Ineos to work on the Grenadier. The aim is to add a new level of capability to what – as I've found out over the past few months – is already a very capable 4x4. Now with added portal axles and 37-inch tyres among a long list of mods.

It looks super cool and, 200mm wider and 281mm taller, towers over everything, making my Grenadier appear utterly diminutive. More than just size, the modifications give the LeTech a stance and proportion that suit it brilliantly well. Where the standard car looks a bit sunken and apologetic, the wheels tucked in and under, this is halfway to being a monster truck and has the attitude to match. And the orange spotlights just look superb and throw an utterly ridiculous amount of light at the trees and scenery.

SPECS

POWERTRAIN: 2993cc TT 6cyl diesel, 4WD
PERFORMANCE: 245bhp, 405lb ft, 0–62mph in 9.9secs, 99mph
KERBWEIGHT: 2,740kg
ECONOMY: 25.2mpg, 291g/km

MILES SO FAR 10,024 **OUR MPG** 22.4

REPORT 4

SKODA KODIAQ iV SE L

£44,635 OTR/£47,960 as tested/£516 pcm

WHY IT'S HERE: All the car your family will ever need – but will you want for more?

DRIVER: *BEN PULMAN*

WITH SCHOOLS ON A BREAK, ENFORCED CHILDCARE evaporates any chance of a decent long term report. Even the generic family stuff you do can't be reported on properly because you've incessantly got tiny humans with you. So, welcome to the worst holiday photo album ever.

I haven't got a picture to illustrate our (smug) zero emission run to the airport with a full boot on 15 December because it was 5.30am, dark, we were running late, and had a mountain of luggage. And I haven't got one from the return journey either as our son was sick on the flight. Apologies.

The following day's six-hour expedition from the south coast to York? Hardly prime time to detour for some "Welcome to Yorkshire" signage. Then thick fog and freezing rain put paid to the return journey, so all I have to report is, when you're away from home, not charging and getting through fuel more regularly than usual, needing a switch to open the fuel filler cap starts to grate.

So, this month I present to you the Skoda Kodiaq at Center Parcs, our brief respite at the end of the holidays. Only who knew you couldn't keep your car with you? Hence the snatched picture between unloading to our lodge and heading off to rent a bike.

SPECS

POWERTRAIN: 1498cc 4cyl turbo petrol + e-motor, 25.7kWh battery, 6spd auto, FWD
PERFORMANCE: 201bhp, 258lb ft, 0–62mph in 8.4secs, 130mph
KERBWEIGHT: 1,977kg
ECONOMY: 565mpg, 11g/km CO_2

MILES SO FAR 5,903 **OUR MPG** 55.1

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TESLA
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GOODBYE

TESLA MODEL 3

£49,990 when new **/£27,000** as tested

WHY IT'S HERE: Is a used Tesla just as good as a new one?

DRIVER: PAUL HORRELL

OUR LONG TERM TEST REPORTS don't commonly end with the odo as high as 37,699 miles. But then they don't usually start at 30,000 as this secondhand one did. So let's first answer the questions we posed in that first report…

"Will longevity of the fit and finish be an issue?" Well, there are some strange mismatches between panels and interior trim parts. Those haven't got any worse, and apart from slightly shiny driver's seat leather they don't strike me as any different from my memories of driving Model 3s when they were new in that era.

"Is the dreaded battery degradation really a thing?" Well, Tesla isn't that clear about battery capacity, but internet spoddery puts this version at 75kWh net when new. Now, looking at the trip computer and multiplying each trip's mileage by the energy consumption readout, then dividing by the proportion of battery used in that trip, is giving me around 67kWh net. So yeah, we seem to have degraded by around 11 per cent capacity since new.

On handing the 2021 car back, I jumped into a brand new one for a couple of hours. It was good to see that this 2021 car had effective anti-ageing. On the day I drove the 2025 one, it had exactly the same software and interface. Including almost all the interface fails and inconsistencies I mentioned in report 3.

So, yeah the old one is fine and I wouldn't fear one with a higher mileage than this. After all you'd probably have heard if high milers were a disaster in waiting, because they've sold so many now. Here in London the Tesla is the cockapoo of cars. Ten years ago you never saw one, and now there are three on every street.

SPECS

POWERTRAIN: dual electric motors, 72kWh battery, AWD

PERFORMANCE: 428bhp, 364lb ft, 0–62mph in 4.4secs, 145mph

KERBWEIGHT: 1,919kg

ECONOMY: 4.2mpkWh, 360 miles

MILES SO FAR: 37,699 **OUR MPKWH:** 3.8

PROJECT CORNER

Rose tinted glasses off, it's time to see the restoration requirements...

THE POTTS REPORT 2

WHAT IS IT? 1991 BMW E30 Design Edition in neon green 1/50
WRITER: *KATIE POTTS*

"IT'S REALLY MINE NOW." I STILL can't quite believe it, standing here with the keys to my very own BMW E30. The drive back was filled with smiles all around from myself and all the people I passed in London, giving me a thumbs up and showing appreciation for seeing a classic car driving past them. The first thing it needed when I got home was a good wash, after sitting for so long it had gained a lovely green tinge to the canvas roof (almost matching the body, how appropriate). And, oh boy, once clean, reality hit – I can now see all the imperfections and rust properly.

But this is where the fun starts! My to do list quickly starts getting longer, ranging from the sills having bitesize rust holes, to the roof needing a mend – it's shrunk from sitting at the side of the road in the sun, so when it rains I get a drip on my shoulder (this works very well at keeping me awake on long journeys) – and other various little snags gained over its 33 years of existence. But hey ho! What do you expect from a car of this age? At least it still runs like a beauty with its engine swapped 325 from the original 318. Got to keep positive. And start ticking off the to do list...

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THE HOT LIST

ASTON MARTIN
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CITY CARS

TG TIP
The £17k 3 trim has best blend of price and tech with heated seats and wireless phone charging

1

KIA PICANTO

PRICE: £15,595–£19,145

Fizzy, frugal and fun to drive, the tiny Picanto has been refined over three generations since 2003. The latest model got a welcome style injection when it was facelifted in 2023. There are surprisingly generous kit levels on offer, too

Aimed at: canny pensioners, new drivers

OR YOU COULD HAVE ONE OF THESE...

2

HYUNDAI i10

PRICE: £16,030–£18,630

This tiny hatchback feels very grown up from behind the wheel, and the i10 is an eminently sensible city car choice with a strong spec. Great on holiday, too

Aimed at: car rental agencies

3

FIAT 500e

PRICE: £24,995–£33,995

One of the original retro tribute acts has matured into an EV while holding to its roots. Back's cramped, but there's still room for soft toys on the parcel shelf

Aimed at: retro hungry millennials

4

TOYOTA AYGO X

PRICE: £16,140–£20,165

What do you get if you cross a city car and an SUV? The Aygo X, apparently – much cooler than the old Aygo, but that X is only worth 11mm of ride height

Aimed at: the kids

5

CITROEN AMI

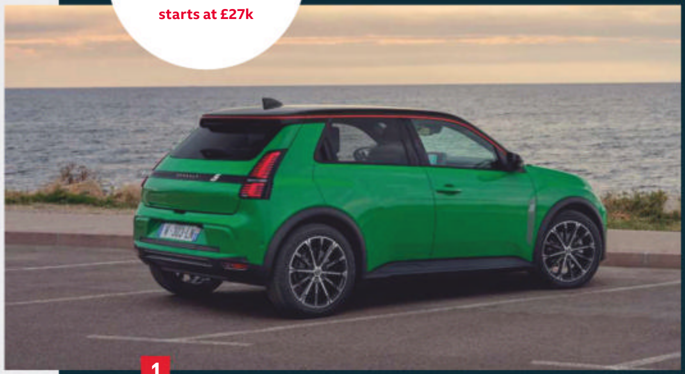
PRICE: £7,695–£8,595

Unlike the other cars here, the Ami really is just for the city, with a range of up to 46 miles and a top speed of 30mph. Still, quicker than getting the bus

Aimed at: antisocial commuters

SUPERMINIS

TG TIP
Techno trim with the 52kWh battery is the best all rounder and starts at £27k



1

RENAULT 5

PRICE: £22,995–£28,995

There's a delicate line to tread with a retro modern take on a stone cold classic, but Renault has managed it well with its new 5. Nods to the past abound, but that doesn't stop the supermini from being a great all round small electric car

Aimed at: retrospectives

OR YOU COULD HAVE ONE OF THESE...

2

SUZUKI SWIFT

PRICE: £19,199–£21,549

Latest version of the Swift shows that cheap can still leave you feeling cheerful, especially with low monthly costs and the right kit levels

Aimed at: bargain hunters

3

RENAULT CLIO

PRICE: £18,395–£24,895

The hybrid version works out a bit expensive, but the Clio is as solid a buy as it ever was – a proven package with a bit of added French flair

Aimed at: Nicole, papa, *toute la famille*

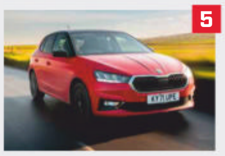
4

MINI COOPER

PRICE: £23,150–£39,000

New Mini takes the car on in all the right ways, with a sharp exterior design and tech-focused interior that's fun but still useful. Ride's a bit firm, though

Aimed at: young professionals/estate agents



5

SKODA FABIA

PRICE: £19,880–£25,870

No electric whizzery here, just a great all-rounder with a solid 1.0-litre 3cyl petrol engine and some nifty interior touches (like the door umbrella)

Aimed at: sensible folks

FAMILY HATCHBACKS

TG TIP
Hybrid only, and stick to entry level **Elegance** trim for decent kit and best economy

1

HONDA CIVIC

PRICE: £35,005–£39,805

The strange thing about the Honda Civic is how wildly it veers from one generation to the next – you get a crazy one, then a sensible one, a crazy one… This current version is the sensible one, but that's not a bad thing – it might be conservative on the outside, but the interior is simply put together and to a high standard. You won't mind long family journeys, and you know that it'll all last for miles and miles. There's a strangely complex hybrid setup under the bonnet, but you needn't worry about all that, because the upshot is that the car drives and handles well enough, but won't cost you the earth in petrol bills. See, sometimes it does pay to be a little sensible. Though if you do want the Civic to be a bit crazy you can always go for the Type R version, which delivers in spades

Aimed at: spreadsheet users

OR YOU COULD HAVE ONE OF THESE…

2

SKODA OCTAVIA

PRICE: £26,775–£39,775

There must be a few noses out of joint in the darkest corporate depths of the VW Group – of the host of cars based on the MkVIII Golf, the Skoda's the best

Aimed at: people with sensible shoes

3

VOLKSWAGEN GOLF

PRICE: £27,760–£45,785

Long the benchmark in this sector, the crown has slipped a little in this eighth generation guise. We wouldn't count the Golf out for long though

Aimed at: everyone

4

MG4

PRICE: £26,995–£36,495

Popped up out of nowhere to become one of the easiest to recommend electric family hatchbacks around. Even looks good in orange

Aimed at: early adopters/taxi drivers

5

RENAULT MEGANE E-TECH

PRICE: £33,995–£37,995

The strange thing about the latest Megane is that it doesn't excel anywhere, but overall adds up to a great family car that happens to be electric too

Aimed at: stylish school runs

BEST TOW CAR

SKODA SUPERB ESTATE

PRICE: from £36,175

The big family holiday is a stressful enough time of year, so when it comes to dusting off the caravan and heading somewhere leafy for a week or two you want a car that will take it all in its stride. Not only is the Skoda a great tow car, it's a massively comfortable family car

Aimed at: a caravan site in Norfolk

HOT HATCHES

TG TIP
Don't be tempted by the £3.8k **Carbon Pack**, it's expensive enough as it is...

1

HONDA CIVIC TYPE R

PRICE: £50,050

Forget the slightly traditional setup of our 2022 Car of the Year, Honda's Type R follows the original hot hatch template fairly slavishly but it has kept it feeling brilliant fresh. The electric ones have a lot of work to do if they want to compete

Aimed at: purists

OR YOU COULD HAVE ONE OF THESE...

2

TOYOTA GR YARIS

PRICE: £44,250-£60,000

The best Toyota ever? It really could be. This first version was a hoot to drive – fun at all speeds in all weathers. Updated one gets more bhp and an auto

Aimed at: cognoscenti

3

FORD FOCUS ST

PRICE: £37,705-£42,905

Practically Jurassic these days, but with a top notch drive this old stager can still show the youngsters where to go, particularly in ST Edition spec

Aimed at: budget purists

4

AUDI S3

PRICE: £47,550-£53,025

The S3 got much better when Audi chucked in the RS3's trick rear diff at the last facelift – this mature all-rounder parties hard but likes a bit of hummus

Aimed at: single car households

5

HYUNDAI IONIQ 5 N

PRICE: £65,000

The hot hatch for the computer games generations is rammed full of gimmicks, but is still able to back it up where it really counts – on the road

Aimed at: gamers

CROSSOVERS

TG TIP
Entry level **Air** trim comes pretty well equipped – just go for the bigger battery

1

KIA EV3

PRICE: £32,995-£43,895

The Kianaissance continues apace, with an intriguing small electric effort that's finally delivering some of what we want from EVs. It's stylish, full of interesting details, about as fuss free as electric motoring gets and efficient too

Aimed at: punctual adopters

OR YOU COULD HAVE ONE OF THESE...

2

DACIA DUSTER

PRICE: £19,695-£23,695

If you're going to go back to basics then you really need to nail those essentials, which the Duster has managed effortlessly into its second generation

Aimed at: bargain hunters

3

VOLVO EX30

PRICE: £32,850-£44,850

The EX30 is full of Scandi cool and delightfully simple to live with. Space is admittedly tight in the back, but the interior quality makes up for it

Aimed at: stylish families

4

FORD PUMA

PRICE: £26,350-£33,600

The UK's official bestseller has taken on the torch of the Fiesta as a decent little car with solid appeal across the board. Just don't mention the old one

Aimed at: everyone

5

HYUNDAI KONA

PRICE: £26,040-£32,740

Korean carmaker's bold design streak continues with the latest Kona, which remains a solid family car. EV's a great first toe in the electric waters

Aimed at: number crunchers

LUXURY SUVs

TG TIP
P510e hybrid is the way to go – in **Vogue SE** trim it's all the Range Rover you'll ever need

1

RANGE ROVER

PRICE: £104,025–£192,000

Arguably the original lifestyle SUV, the Range Rover has evolved massively since the 1970 original, developing into a luxury beast. The latest one hasn't just nailed the brief, it has set the benchmark for everyone else to follow

Aimed at: cash buyers

OR YOU COULD HAVE ONE OF THESE...

2

VOLVO EX90

PRICE: £96,255–£100,555

The old XC90 was starting to get left behind, but the new EX90 has wrestled its way to the front of the post SUV queue while remaining as charming as ever

Aimed at: polo necks

3

FERRARI PUROSANGUE

PRICE: £313,360

Ferrari says this definitely isn't an SUV, but ironically with its sporty credentials it's probably the most SUV out of all the SUVs that have ever been made

Aimed at: posers

4

ROLLS-ROYCE CULLINAN

PRICE: £298,800–£342,600

Even Rolls-Royce had to follow the money and make an SUV. Fortunately you can't see what it looks like from the back seat – that's the place to enjoy it

Aimed at: old money

5

BMW iX

PRICE: £70,985–£124,605

This tech-laden electric SUV takes a different approach to luxury – it's still comfortable, but it dazzles with interesting materials and nice touches

Aimed at: tech VPs

TG TIP
Just two trims here – pricier **First Edition** is the only way to get round headlights

OFF ROADERS

1

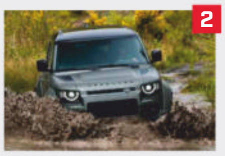
LAND CRUISER

PRICE: £74,995–£79,995

The Toyota was always peerless off road, but it had everything except kerbside appeal – until this stylish retro version arrived. It might be criminal to watch a pedigree rockhopper waste away on the school run, but it gets slippery in Richmond sometimes

Aimed at: peacekeepers

OR YOU COULD HAVE ONE OF THESE...



2

LAND ROVER DEFENDER

PRICE: £58,310–£160,800

Everyone had an opinion about the classic Defender, but no one was buying. Now it's selling at 10x the rate and the full fat OCTA takes it further than ever

Aimed at: school run mums

3

MERCEDES-BENZ G-CLASS

PRICE: £136,690–£203,595

The looks of the G-Wagen are the same as they've ever been, but that masks the progress that's been made under the skin. The new electric one is fun

Aimed at: original gangsters

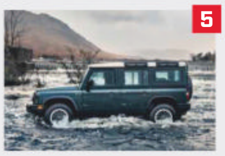
4

FORD RANGER

PRICE: £35,130–£62,557

Like a good pair of jeans, the Ranger is able to switch seamlessly from work to play, no wonder it's a trades favourite. A little bit large for parts of the UK though

Aimed at: sole traders



5

INEOS GRENADIER

PRICE: £51,931–£79,140

A passion project from a rich old billionaire who wanted a modernised version of his compromised old 4x4. Fair enough, seems to have managed it

Aimed at: old rich men

SPORTS CARS

TG TIP
Into driving? Carrera T. For everyday use, it's the base Carrera with Heritage Design interior

1

PORSCHE 911

PRICE: £99,800–£139,100

The definitive sports car, despite its inherent layout flaws, because it's been ruthlessly honed millimetre by millimetre over the past 70 years by people who really know what they're doing. Newly facelifted 992.2 version even has a hybrid option

Aimed at: heavyweights

OR YOU COULD HAVE ONE OF THESE...

2

ALPINE A110

PRICE: £54,490–£91,940

This stripped down French number has managed to take up the baton for feathery, beautifully handling sports cars since Lotus gave up trying

Aimed at: lightweights

3

TOYOTA GR86

PRICE: £32,495

The back to basics sports car is destined to be a future classic, and it's one of the best cars that Toyota's made (but it's no GR Yaris)

Aimed at: purists

4

PORSCHE 718 CAYMAN 4.0

PRICE: £75,300

Sure, it's getting old, but the Cayman is one of those compelling driver's cars that we need to celebrate while they're still allowed to be on sale

Aimed at: B-road blasters

5

BMW M2

PRICE: £65,915

The latest version of the BMW M2 is more grown up than it used to be, but doesn't that apply to us all? It's a great daily driver that grows on you over time

Aimed at: wealthier purists

SUPERCARS

TG TIP
Don't have the £6,250 super lightweight carbon seats. Regular buckets are much better

1

McLAREN 750S

PRICE: £244,760

Launched in 2023 as a successor to the 720S, McLaren really stepped it up with this car – it's better to drive than its predecessor, but crucially it's also better to sit in and easier to operate. It even comes with Apple CarPlay...

Aimed at: rich Shanghai drivers

OR YOU COULD HAVE ONE OF THESE...

2

FERRARI 296 GTB

PRICE: £241,550

People got nervous when they heard this Ferrari supercar would be a V6 hybrid... they needn't have worried, it all serves to make it a better drive

Aimed at: self-made business people

3

LAMBORGHINI REVUELTO

PRICE: £446,742

There's hybrid tech in there, but there's also a socking V12 in what could very well be the best Lamborghini since the iconic 1960s Miura

Aimed at: high rollers

4

PORSCHE 911 GT3 RS

PRICE: £192,600

You've got to be a good driver to get the most out of the GT3 RS's repertoire, but Porsche has thrown everything it has at this racer for the road

Aimed at: amateur racers

5

McLAREN ARTURA

PRICE: £189,200

The conservative exterior serves to hide some big developments under the skin – ssh, but the Artura might even be a better daily driver than the 296 GTB

Aimed at: brave buyers

HYPERCARS

TG TIP
It'd be sacrilegious to change anything on Gordon's car, but he'll paint it how you like

1

GMA T.50

PRICE: £2.8 MILLION

Gordon Murray had already done it all with the McLaren F1 back in the 1990s, but you always sensed he had a bit more to prove. And here's the result, the car that shows lightning doesn't just strike twice, it'll do it exactly where Gordon tells it to. "The last great analogue supercar" was what Gordon Murray promised – and he's delivered it with relentless attention to detail and a dedication to the end prize. With the electric era almost upon us, we'll probably never see the likes of this pure, undiluted V12-powered monster ever again. It's not just the sum of Murray's knowhow and experience distilled into a ruthless hypercar, you can get something out of it without being an F1 driver, it's an enjoyable drive for whoever happens to be behind the wheel. Your move, everyone else

Aimed at: loaded enthusiasts

OR YOU COULD HAVE ONE OF THESE...

2

PAGANI UTOPIA

PRICE: £2.2 MILLION

In a truly utopian society we'd all be driving one of these. It's not bad for a third car – easy to forget that Pagani's been very discerning about its model lineup

Aimed at: tech billionaires

3

ASTON MARTIN VALKYRIE

PRICE: £3 MILLION

The 'F1 car for the road' line has become a bit of a cliche, but the Valkyrie is certainly visceral and noisy enough to be considered that way

Aimed at: rich collectors

4

KOENIGSEGG JESKO

PRICE: £2.9 MILLION

Well it's named after the boss's dad, so it had to be a good car – and it is. Certainly worthy of a pat on the head, well done son

Aimed at: Monaco residents

5

BUGATTI CHIRON

PRICE: £3.2 MILLION

If the Veyron was the Volkswagen Group's moonshot, the Chiron reaches for the stars at warp speed. How do you follow this?

Aimed at: old money

BEST SMALL VAN

FORD TRANSIT COURIER

PRICE: from £16,200 [PLUS VAT]

The fine economics of last mile deliveries are somewhat lost on us, but we'd have the most fun carrying things round in the Transit Courier and that's really the most important thing to think about, isn't it? Plus it looks cool, there's an EV as well as petrol and diesel options

Aimed at: people who need vans

BIG FAMILY CARS

TG TIP
It only costs £500 extra to go for the 7-seat over the 5-seat model – a no brainer

1

VW ID.BUZZ 7-SEAT

PRICE: £59,545–£67,945

The ID.Buzz is not merely another retro face (that's the sugar on the electric pill), in many ways it's an innovative bit of family transport, especially in its seven-seater guise that finally releases the practicality the car needed

Aimed at: lifestyle families

OR YOU COULD HAVE ONE OF THESE...

2

SKODA SUPERB ESTATE

PRICE: £34,875–£48,540

This car has always had to be good with a name like that, but it's hard to think of any other family estate out there that does a better job for the money

Aimed at: posh families

3

BMW i5 TOURING

PRICE: £69,945–£99,995

You wait ages for an electric family estate and then a brilliant one comes along all at once. Shows off all of BMW's electric knowhow and body control wizardry

Aimed at: the outside lane

4

HYUNDAI SANTA FE

PRICE: £46,775–£57,635

Stylish, well built, comfortable and quiet – not to mention loads of room inside for carrying people and stuff. Hyundai's hot streak continues

Aimed at: sensible families

5

DACIA JOGGER

PRICE: £18,295–£23,995

The Jogger is a masterpiece of cutting out the unnecessary (weight *and* money) while maintaining the fundamentals of a useful family estate

Aimed at: clever families

GRAND TOURERS

TG TIP
Got a dog? Aston's got you – the **Pet Pack** throws in a bed and a portable washer

1

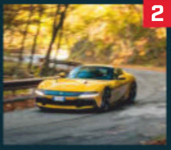
ASTON VANQUISH

PRICE: FROM £330,000

The Vanquish has been reborn – sounds a little grand, but the latest version has brought the car right up to date for its third incarnation. It mixes an exciting drive with genuine grand touring ability in a way that must have all its rivals quaking

Aimed at: secret agents

OR YOU COULD HAVE ONE OF THESE...



2

FERRARI 12CILINDRI

PRICE: £336,500

Ferrari has softened the edges off the 12Cilindri's forebears to create a car that's probably the most capable all-rounder to have come out of Maranello

Aimed at: loafer wearers

3

BENTLEY CONTINENTAL GT

PRICE: £152,820–£257,700

If you had to drive really far there's probably no car you'd rather be in than the Continental GT. Except maybe a chauffeur driven Phantom of course

Aimed at: pipe smokers

4

PORSCHE 911 TURBO

PRICE: £200,600

The 911 range is like one of those Italian gelaterias with hundreds of flavours – seems excessive, but we love them all. Turbo might be the pick of the bunch

Aimed at: daily drivers

5

MERCEDES-AMG GT COUPE

PRICE: £164,905–£191,745

The new second generation GT has developed into a great all-rounder, a usable day to day car that straddles the line between mainstream and exotic

Aimed at: sharp suits

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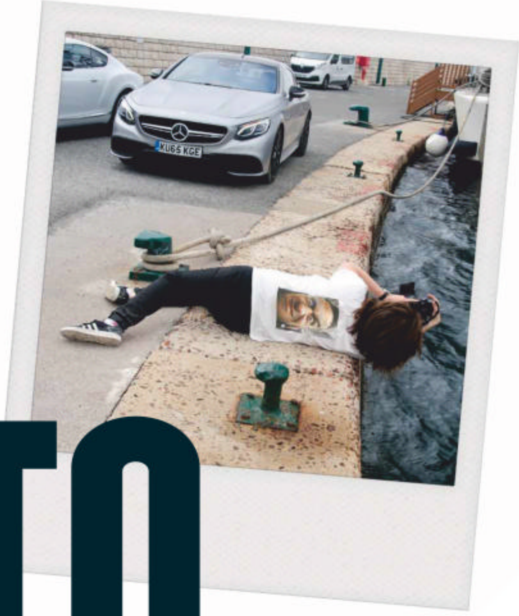

HOW TO...

Sell a car

Buying a car is the easy bit – you spend months looking for exactly what you want, read what everyone has to say about it, then when you find the perfect car you turn up and it's gone. Repeat until you're ready to lower your standards and hand over some cash for a vehicle that you don't *quite* want. Selling is a whole different kettle of ball games, it's that much tougher trying to persuade someone to hand over their precious notes for something that it's been firmly established you don't want anymore. It requires organisation and a thick skin.

I realise that I fundamentally lack credibility on the topic – the last car that I sold was a second gen Mercedes A-Class during one of the more relaxed periods of the COVID-19 pandemic when the secondhand market had tanked, receiving an amount of money that Mrs Burnett still regularly brings up four years later.

Now I know the basic principles – bake some fresh bread, put some coffee on, fresh lick of paint, that sort of thing, but I thought I'd ask around for some advice. Most of the *TG* team wouldn't touch a car with over 5,000 miles on it, but photographer Mark Riccioni is a used car grandmaster, he's probably already shifted three cars this week. So what would be his top tips?

"Take good pictures... but not too good," says Mark. Presumably because it would put him out of a job. Just use your phone, he reckons, but park the car in front of a "nice clean backdrop". Apparently if the pics are too nice people will assume you're a trade seller – we're obviously not buying from the same trade sellers.

Then you need to check the tyres. "If you're selling a car with four different Linglong ditchfinders on each corner, buyers will likely assume you've cut corners on maintenance regardless of tread depth," explains Mark. "That doesn't mean you need a Pirelli P Zero on your Golf diesel, but a matching set of Contis or Toyos will go a long way."

Have you read Trump's *Art of the Deal* yet? Mark clearly has. "Whatever your asking price is, whack an extra grand or two on top. Everyone wants to feel like they've got a deal." And if they're rubbish at haggling that's your summer holiday sorted.

The roadside recovery funsters at the AA have some sage advice about selling your car too – things like "don't be a victim of fraud" and "make sure you get paid". But then they also urge sellers to "price your car realistically", so what do they know.

> **"I know the basics of selling – bake some fresh bread, put some coffee on"**

WORDS: SAM BURNETT **PHOTOGRAPHY:** GETTY

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